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Wild Bird

A STORY OF THE WILD NEW LANDS OF THE CANADIAN NORTHWEST

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AT the top of the long rise the stage halted, and the passengers started to climb aboard again. By walking up the hills they accomplished the double purpose of easing the horses' load and limbering their own cramped limbs.

One of the passengers was an exceedingly pretty girl in a smart blue hat, and at the top of every hill there was a general contention among the male passengers for a seat beside her. The driver, as one possessing a prior right, patted the other half of his seat. A tall, bearded prospector, who had climbed in behind him, leaned out and offered the girl a paw like a grizzly's.

" Come in here with me, Nell! I got a story about Louis Riel I ain't told you yet."

In the third seat two younger men made common cause together.

" Ah, Mort 'll talk you deef, dumb, and blind, Nell!" said one of them. " Sit here betwixt Pete and me, an' we'll let you do the talkin'."

A fourth man remained standing in the road to see which way the cat would jump, prepared to act accordingly.

The girl hesitated, looking them all over with a good-natured and contemptuous smile. Her prettiness was of the fragile cast, most potent with men. She had delicately hollowed cheeks and great brown eyes, perfectly disillusioned. Finally she shook her head.

" I'm tired of you all," she drawled. " I'm going to ride with Miss Maury until the next spell."

This other feminine passenger had taken the rearmost seat of the stage, where she sat partly concealed, owing to the fact that the last pair of side curtains was down. She moved over with a smile. She seemed almost as much fascinated by the decorative Nell as the men were.

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She was quite as pretty as Nell herself, and fresher, but hers was a beauty under cover. She simply kept it to herself, consequently none of the foolish men had discerned it. The old sailor hat she wore, which was faded and a little warped, seemed to advertise the fact that she was not out hunting. From the first the men, intuitively recognizing that she had nothing for them, had let her alone.

The stage clattered on.

" What's your first name?" asked Nell. " Here we been ridin' together 'most a week. Nobody uses a handle to their name up here."

" Ann," said the other.

She was rather shy with Nell, but bright-eyed and observant.

" You look like an Ann," said Nell.

" What do Anns look like?" asked the girl, with a delightful smile.

" Oh, sort of household treasures."

Ann laughed.

" What's your graft?" asked Nell.

Ann looked puzzled.

" What do you do for your country?"

" I teach school."

Nell stared.

" Lord, did you expect to find any schools up here?"

" I didn't come up here to teach," said Ann evasively. " I just want to see the country."

To announce at large the real purpose of her journey—that she had come North to search for her father — would render her ridiculous, Ann felt; and like all young people, she had a dread of ridicule.

" Well, there it is," said Nell, with a sweep of her arm.

The road was edging around the shoulder of a hill, and the wild, raw valley of the Campbell River lay spread beneath them, all broken with rock masses and scraggled with trees. Beyond it rose the mountains.

" What part of the East you from?" asked Nell.

" Maryland."

" Some different from Cariboo, eh?"

A picture of that fat land rose before Ann's eyes.

" As different as one country could be from another," she said simply.

Nell took a cigarette from the breast pocket of her smart serge coat, where she kept a little row handy to her hand, lighted it, and flipped the match over the wheel. Ann watched her, fascinated.

" Have one?" asked Nell.

" Oh, no!" said Ann, blushing and smiling. " It wouldn't suit an Ann; but you do it beautifully."

Nell shrugged.

" They'll kill me yet," she said.

Nell blew clouds of smoke, and regarded the broad backs of the men with distaste.

" Lord, but I'm sick of them!" she said.

" Of whom?" said Ann.

" Everything that wears pants. There's nothing to it!"

" I've been thinking about that," said Ann shyly.

" The devil you have!" said Nell, with a sidelong look.

" I mean I wondered how a woman like you could be content to stay in this rough country."

" Too much competition in the cities," said Nell. " Up here I'm known. They call me the Queen of North Cariboo. Maybe you've heard. It's something to be queen even of a dump like this. As for men, I expect they're much the same everywhere. This country isn't so bad. At least we're honester about things up here. A city, with its newspapers and parsons and cops and old women, makes me sick! It isn't the country I'm fed up with—it's life in general, I guess. It's years since I had a thrill. I shan't stay up here always. I'm saving money."

" Oh, I'm glad to hear that!" said Ann innocently.

Nell looked at her curiously.

" You're a funny kid. What is it to you whether I save?"

Ann blushed without replying.

" Do you save?" demanded Nell.

" A little," said Ann; " but of course I'm blowing it all in on this trip."

" You're a nice one to be talking about saving, then!"

" If I have to, I can go on teaching till I'm old," said Ann simply.

Nell bit her lip and looked away.

Up in front Mort Levering threw back his head and yawned, ending with a roar that came echoing back from the hills.

" Nell, hop over the seats and come talk to me," he playfully suggested.

" I'm better occupied," returned Nell.

The other men laughed delightedly.

The whispered conversation on the back seat was resumed.

" How old are you?" asked Nell, with a strange curiosity.

"Twenty," said Ann.

"I'm twenty-four," said Nell.

The other girl could not restrain her glance of surprise.

"You think I'm lying," said Nell; "but I'm not. I been on my own for nine years now. It's the cagy look you get that makes you seem older. I got six years more before I'll begin to break; and you can fool men for years after that, if you're clever—the big boobies!"

Ann had no comment to make.

"You don't care about men, do you?" asked Nell.

Again the charming, merry smile broke through Ann's shyness.

"Why, what makes you think so?" she countered.

"Well, for one thing, that hat," said Nell.

Ann was not in the least offended.

"I thought I ought to dress as plainly as possible for a journey like this," she said.

"Back in Maryland did you have a fellow?" Nell inquired, with her poignant curiosity.

"No," said Ann. "I am not attractive to men," she went on, with the air of one who had long made up her mind to the fact.

"You're prettier than I am," said Nell.

"That's nonsense!"

"Believe me, I'm an expert," said Nell dryly.

"Then why do they never look at me?"

"You've got to show them you're willing to be looked at."

"I'd rather have some man discover me."

"You'll wait a long time, kid. Men are not discoverers—they're sheep. Look at the way they run after me, just because I'm the fashion. I made myself the fashion. Your time will come," she added darkly.

"I wouldn't go after a man if there was only one on earth!" said Ann, with spirit.

"There always is only one," said Nell.

"It's more fun to be chased than to do the chasing," said Ann.

"Sure," said Nell; "but you'll find you've got to get him going before he'll set up a chase."

"I want to be swept off my feet unawares," said Ann.

"That's what all young girls say," retorted Nell.

Johnny Lovat, the driver, a quarterbreed, pointed with his whip to a curious limestone scarp that crossed the valley below them. Out of a break in this cliff, a mile away, the river issued in a foaming torrent.

"That's the mouth of the second cañon," said Johnny. "Lariat Cañon, some calls it, because there's a big round eddy in it you couldn't get out of no more than if you was caught in a rope. There's eleven cañons, in all, in three hundred miles between Yewcroft and Ching's Landing, where you take to the river. Mostly they have walls as smooth as if they was sliced down. Ole Father Campbell is one river the white man lets be. He had to build him a road alongside it!"

Above the cliff the floor of the valley was smoother, and the road descended from the mountainside. The view of the travelers was now more restricted. Most of the land had been burned over, and the black shafts of the trees stuck crazily this way and that, or were piled fantastically on the ground. Patches of purple fireweed mantled the heaps of rotting logs, and young aspen and birch were pushing up, preparatory to making all beautiful again.

Over the trees, living and dead, they had glimpses of snow peaks to east and west, and when they topped a rise more peaks closed in the view to the north. It was noon of a July day, and the sky was forget-me-not blue.

On the floor of the valley the old telegraph road was innocent of grading, and the horses could not travel above a walk. Many of the mudholes in shaded spots were historic.

"Hadn't never dried up within recollection of the oldest settler," Johnny Lovat said.

Around these places new tracks had been laboriously cut through the fallen timber. Their withered little driver was often reminded of a story.

"See that hole yonder?" he said. "On my last trip up but one I come across old Pop Hopper stuck in that there hole with his load. Must have been asleep when he druv in, 'cause everybody knows it. Us fellows hates to get behind Pop Hopper on the road. Allus got to stop somewheres to help him out. As the saying is, he'd get through quicker if he put his neck in the collar and let his hosses drive. He's a character, Pop Hopper is. He don't have to freight—he's got money.

"Well, this time I speak of I knew he was ahead of me, 'cause I see streaks of egg yolk in the road. Nobody but Pop

Hopper would load egg crates in the bottom of his wagon and bales of hay on top. Sure enough, I comes on him sunk in the mud 'most to the tops of his wheels, and him just setting there waiting to be helped. Well, I took my hosses out, and some other guys come along, too. All in all it took six teams pulling and about twenty men prizing to get Pop Hopper clear of the mud; and him standing alongside cussing us out like the foreman of a railway gang. That's Pop Hopper's way. He druv on, cracking his whip, but the rest of us had to spell awhile to rest up.

" Well, I'm damned if a couple of miles farther along he didn't turn her over altogether on a little side hill. Yes, sir, when I come up, all four of his wheels was turning in the air; and Pop Hopper a setting there with his back against a tree, eating a little lunch. Yes, there was a bucket of pickles busted open right convenient to his hand."

" Pop Hopper and Wes Trickett, they's a pair," said Mort Levering. " One on the land and one on the water. Ole Wes is as good a navigator as Pop Hopper is a horseman. I mind once I was aboard his crummy ole stern-kicker when he tried to take her up the Gisborne Rapids, the water being low. Well, sir, his rotten ole hawsers busted as fast as they could be carried upstream. Every time they parted we'd settle back on a shoal, and Wes would go inside and take a swig of patent medicine. He buys every new kind he hears of, and keeps 'em all on a shelf at the foot of his bunk. I seen 'em there. They say he mixes different kinds together when he wants a new kick. One time, when we jolted on a shoal, she snapped her crazy ole stovepipe short off, and we had to lay to a couple of hours to fix that. When we were near to the head of the rapid, one more rope busted, and Wes suddenly lost heart. We were 'most up, but he turned her around and went down again. Say, I was sore! He put me out on the shore, and there I had to spell until I could get a parcel of breeds to pack my outfit through the bush."

After six days in the same company, everybody's stock of stories was running low. For long periods the travelers rode in silence, uncomfortably shifting their positions on the hard seats, and yawning enormously. Time passed, said one, like a slow freight on an up grade. The men sat sidewise for the most part, casting sheep's eyes back at Nell, who ignored them.

Nell took off her smart blue hat, pinned it to a side curtain, and put her head down in Ann's lap, without so much as " by your leave." Ann was greatly pleased by the childlike act. She gazed down at the other girl with a half smile, marveling at the real peachiness of Nell's complexion, and the shine of her chestnut hair, after all she had been through. She was a great and fascinating enigma to Ann.

Nell slept, or seemed to sleep, and Ann mused over her, fending her, as well as she could, from the jolts of the coach. How terrified she had been of Nell the first day, seeing her so sure of herself, so sure of her men! But it had gradually passed, as she found Nell quite human. The discovery had compelled Ann to change all her notions about girls of Nell's sort.

Somehow it comforted Ann to believe that they were not so bad as they were painted. One did not have to be strange with them. To be sure, on the surface, Nell was as hard and wary as Ann had supposed such girls must be; but it was only on the surface. It was an assumption not greatly different from any other professional manner. Did not Ann have to be hard and wary with her school children?

There was really such a little difference between her and Nell; yet it seemed to erect a whole world between them. But did it really, or was that only an idea?

" This is the last hill, ladies!" cried Johnny Lovat. " Down at the other side is Ching's Landing, where I bid you all a fond farewell."

" Hope to God Wes Trickett 'll be there with his old washtub," muttered Mort Levering. " You never can depend on Wes!"

" He'll be there to-day, though," said Johnny. " He knows Nellie's coming in."

Nell rose and put on the blue hat. From somewhere she produced a tiny mirror, in which she studied herself an inch at a time, tucking in her stray locks and powdering her small nose. Ann watched every move, delighted.

" Hey, Nell!" cried Mort. " When we get up to the Fort, don't you give me the go-by for any of them slick guys up there, do you hear? Remember I made the trip with you, Nell!"

" That's your handicap, Mort," Nell replied, with her alluring insolence. " I'm tired of you before we arrive!"

They had turned at right angles, to climb the side of a rocky hill that ran straight athwart the valley. For some distance back they had glimpsed the dark wall ahead of them. They had passed out of the burned country, and superb fir trees rose wherever a foothold was obtainable among the rocks. Under the firs a sort of raspberry bush spread large, pale leaves to gather up the attenuated sunlight. They could hear the tremendous voice of the river quite close now, but they could not see it.

The road turned sharply on itself, into a rocky gulch, which would lead them to the top of the height. There were no fir trees in the gulch, but trees peered over the top. The defile was filled with detached rock masses, among which the wagon track wound its way.

Suddenly, with ear-piercing yells, a dozen figures leaped out from behind the rocks, brandishing rifles. The leaders reared back against the wheel horses; all four kicked over the traces and plunged in inextricable confusion. The stage started to roll back down hill. Johnny Lovat jammed on his brake. All the male passengers sat in blank consternation. In Canada, holdups have never been common enough to educate the inhabitants in the proper technique.

A moment of consternation, then Mort Levering started to bellow:

"You, Stinnett! You, Burnsey! You, Corning! I know you!"

He ended with a torrent of sulphurous profanity. The seeming attack dissolved in a gale of laughter. The highwaymen slapped their thighs, dropped on the ground, rolled about, and whooped in unappeasable merriment.

Mort continued to curse them with unabated vigor. The other men in the stage took it more or less in good part. It was the only thing they could do. Nell was perfectly unruffled throughout. Ann was all eyes. So keen was her passion for new experiences that she felt she wouldn't have minded much if it had been a real holdup.

The men crowded close to the stage at Nellie's side, and stretched up an odd bouquet cf sinewy hands to grasp hers. Ann, peeping around the other girl, had the impression of a stormy sea of masculinity. It was impossible to distinguish individuals.

"Nell! Nell! Nell!" they chanted. "*She's* all right! *Who's* all right? Nellie Nairns! *Wow!*"

There was a flushed quality in both faces and voices. They had been drinking, thought Ann, without alarm. Watching Nellie, she marked the girl's half contemptuous smile, calculated and yet damnably seductive.

"Nell, you're a sight to heal sore eyes! By God, you're prettier than ever! Nell, we haven't seen your like up here since strawberries ripened in the winter! Nell, if you'll only stay up here, we'll give you the damn town!"

A black-haired youth climbed on the wheel, and, catching Nellie's hand, kissed it. He was pulled down with yells and jeers. Apparently this was against the code.

Several of the men ran to the horses and began to unhitch them.

"You, Johnny!" cried one. "Take your horses to hell! We're going to pull Nellie down to the boat by man power!"

When the group split up, Ann could begin to distinguish individuals—a boy not seventeen, with cheeks like roses; a thick Hercules, the wildest of the crew, red-haired, red-faced, red-armed, bawling with excitement; a black-visaged man, saturnine, with a devilish grin; an old man, capering like a goat, snapping his fingers.

The male passengers climbed down and became one with the welcomers—that is, all except Mort Levering, who planted his great bulk stubbornly on the seat, and lit a cigar.

"Come on, Mort!" cried the red-haired one. "We're not going to haul your fat carcass!"

"Come on yourself, Red!" retorted Mort. "I paid my fare, and I'm damned if I'll walk!"

"You damned sure *will* walk, old man!" cried Red. "This is the Nellie Nairns special! Come on, boys! *'Raus mit* him!"

A dozen pair of hands dragged Mort down, amid cruel laughter. They set him on his feet, jammed his hat over his eyes, and stuck his trampled cigar back between his lips.

"Take the driver's seat, Nell!" cried Red.

She stepped nimbly over the backs of the seats, carelessly amused by the uproar. The boys whistled and cheered the display of silk stockings. Somebody shoved the whip into her hand, but she coolly put it back in its socket. A few men glanced askance at Ann in her corner, half hidden by the curtain, but none addressed her.

Four men held up the wagon pole and guided it; the rest ran ahead with a rope, which was affixed underneath the wagon. They started with a jerk.

They toiled up the last few yards of the hill, and came out on a level space. Here the men broke into a run. It was a bare, stony flat, the summit of the hill. They soon began to descend the other side, running faster and faster, with wild yells and whoops. The canny Nell's hand went to the brake.

The river lay revealed now — a placid stretch of water, bordered with aspens. In the midst of all the excitement Ann had a glance for the beautiful stream. Indeed, the whole scene was etched on her retina. Ann's eyes were starry, her lips parted.

" This is wonderful," she was thinking. " I mustn't miss anything!"

Faster and faster they went down the stony track, the old stage lurching and swaying, the men yelling. It was like an old-fashioned fire engine going to a fire. They had two turns to negotiate, and they made them on two wheels. Only Nell's hand tugging at the brake saved them from complete disaster.

Far in the rear, Mort Levering stumped down in solitary, injured dignity.

At the bottom of the hill they tore across a natural meadow, and, making a wide turn, drew up smartly close beside the river bank. The men were breathless with yelling and laughing.

Below them, with her nose grounded on the shingle, Ann saw an absurd little stern-wheel steamboat with her name painted on the side of her pilot house—" Tewkesbury L. Swett." She looked as if she had been built by boys out of odds and ends in somebody's back yard. Her emaciated smokestack had several kinks in it. On the deck a fat man with a grizzled, curly poll was frantically waving a yachting cap. Ann supposed this would be Wes Trickett.

Two men made a chair of their hands and carried Nell aboard. Ann followed on her own two feet, the men falling back, somewhat abashed. It was clear that no one could tell just where she came in.

Out on the deck Nell perched herself on the capstan, surrounded by her court, while Ann sought a place inside the rough deck house. A bale of hay supplied her with a seat where she could see all that went on outside, herself unseen. The mail bags and the express packages were carried aboard, but Mort Levering was still only halfway across the meadow.

" Pull out, pull out, cap!" shouted Red, excited as a schoolboy. " Serve him damned well right to be left behind!"

Captain Wes Trickett, with his yachting cap balanced absurdly on his curly pate, pulled a long blast on the piping whistle of the Tewkesbury L. Swett, and the company on board had the exquisite delight of seeing the fat Mortimer running like a deer across the grass and down the bank. Homeric laughter greeted his arrival on board. He stalked away astern.

II

THE smoothness of the voyage upstream was delicious to shaken bones. Notwithstanding her interest in her surroundings, Ann fell asleep after supper, propped on her bale of hay in a corner of the deck house.

She was awakened by a blast of the whistle. The sun was still up. The river was broad, still, and gleaming under the level rays. On either hand rose high, green-clad hills, hiding the mountain peaks farther back. Ahead, looking up a long, straight reach of the stream, a little settlement was to be seen, crouching at the foot of the hills. This Ann knew for Fort Edward, her present goal.

At a mile's distance it was beautiful, the little man-made buildings standing out with a strange significance in the wilderness of untouched nature. Unfortunately, however, its beauty decreased as one drew closer. Still, the site was superb.

Here the Campbell River swung around the forefoot of a hill, and on the other side a fine tributary, the Boardman, came in from the northwest. The settlement was at the junction of the rivers — a spot that seemed predestined for a town, for the hills behind it drew back in a semicircle, as if to give room for a future metropolis.

At a close view, though unbeautiful, the place was highly picturesque, sprawling amid a perfect chaos of stumps. A few trees had been left standing, mostly with a crazy list to one side or the other. The little shacks, more like poultry houses than habitations for men, were of yellow pine. Some were covered with tar paper fastened down with tin spheres as big as silver dollars. A few older and bigger structures were of a curious hybrid construction, walled with logs and roofed with canvas. Out of the ruck rose one two-story building, quite splendidly ugly in the nakedness of freshly sawed pine.

Before the center of the town there was a strong eddy, where the two rivers came together. One stream was brown, the other greenish, and for a long way the waters did not mix. The steamboat kept to the Campbell River side — the greenish side. The river was in flood, and the current washed the very bank on which the settlement was planted. Along the edge of the bank, as they approached, a fringe of men ran and gesticulated and shouted. Ann noted that there was not a single woman to be seen.

The top of the bank was on a level with the roof of the deck house, and all the passengers climbed a ladder to the roof, the better to see. The uproar ashore was prodigious. What with the lack of a beach and the swiftness of the current, it was no easy matter to make the little Swett fast. So many men leaped aboard from the shore to shake Nell's hand that the craft took on a dangerous list, and Captain Wes Trickett quite lost his head in the confusion.

Finally one who seemed to be in authority ashore ordered them all back, and shepherded them away from the edge, that the crew might have a chance to make their hawsers fast to stumps. The steamboat settled snugly alongside the bank. There was no need of any plank to disembark.

In the pandemonium of cheers and whoops, separate voices finally made themselves heard:

"Shut up!"

"Keep back!"

"Let's do things proper!"

"Give Cal a chance!"

The men divided into two groups, leaving an opening between. Through the opening came he who had seemed to be in authority. Ann was first struck by the odd fact that he had six or seven watch chains stretched across his middle; and from the bulge of his waistcoat pockets, watches must have been attached to them. He was a tall, middle-aged man, with the figure of a muscular youth and a youth's fine carriage. His face was hard and seamed and quizzical. He had a bullet head closely cropped.

Nell was standing alone on the boat with a hand on her hip, smiling. The man stepped aboard and made her an elegant bow.

"Nell," he began in an oratorical voice, "as the so-called mayor of this here burg, it's up to me to speak for the assembled multitude, see? Some might object that I ain't been regularly elected mayor, so to speak, but the fellows just naturally started calling me mayor, and I guess that gives me as good a right to the job as a wig and a gold chain. At that, I got plenty of chains, as you see, being the general repository for them as is no longer able to look after their own valuables.

"Well, as I was saying, being the mayor, it is my duty to welcome distinguished visitors in our midst—crown heads, and presidents, and the like; but we don't set no great store by such big bugs up here. Let 'em stay where folks is accustomed to crooking the knee. Of course, if any crown heads or presidents should come along, we'd treat 'em right. We'd just prop 'em against the bar at Maroney's, and if they could stand up under more'n two shots of Jack's squirrel whisky, we'd respect 'em as men.

"Nell, you got a better claim on us than any ole crown head or moth-eaten prince, see? Nothin' moth-eaten about you, Nell! You're the prettiest girl in Cariboo, and the famousest; and we want you to know we appreciate the honor you do us in paying us a visit. For though Fort Edward's bound to become the hub of North Cariboo in a couple of years or so—I own some lots here, so you can believe what I say—at present I admit it's not much to look at. It's a leetle onfinished. Nell, your coming among us is bound to make a hell of a lot of trouble for the authorities—which is me; but it's worth it. I hereby present you with the freedom of our city, and if there's anything you want in the damn hole, it's yours for the asking!"

The orator drew an immense rusty key from his pocket. Nell accepted it with a laugh, and hung it to one of the buttons of her jacket. Wild bursts of cheering broke out. The mayor offered Nell his arm, and they stepped ashore. The crowd opened to let them through, and fell in behind. Nell bowed to the right and left, like royalty.

Ann, not knowing what else to do, tagged along behind, carrying her suit case. As she turned her back on the steamboat, she experienced a horrid sinking of the heart. The place was so appallingly ugly, with its muddy tracks leading away in different directions among the tree stumps; and not a woman in sight—except Nell.

Ann's intuition warned her that from this time forward her path and Nell's would lie separate. She had no idea which way to turn. She felt like a lost child.

The crowd in front of her opened, and she beheld an antique democrat standing in the track, and Nell climbing into it. As she seated herself, Nell caught sight of Ann, and, with a barely perceptible motion of the head, indicated the back seat.

Ann thankfully accepted the invitation. Nobody paid any particular attention to the girl in the old sailor hat. They took her, perhaps, for a servant of Nell's.

The mayor gathered up the reins, and they proceeded, jolting over roots and splashing through mudholes. The crowd accompanied them, some running ahead, some keeping up alongside, careless of how they were splashed. All were shouting facetious remarks, in an endeavor to attract notice to themselves.

Nell paid not the slightest attention. In the midst of the racket she and the mayor maintained a polite conversation. Ann stretched her ears to hear it. Nell addressed the mayor as "Cal."

"Me and a couple of other hard guys keeps pretty good order here," Cal said. "You needn't be afraid."

"I shan't be," said Nell.

"It's true the gov'ment has threatened to send in the provincial police. That's along of a little fuss we had here last March, before the ice went out; but since then it's been as quiet as a Sunday school. We don't want no police here. There's few enough free places left on earth. The fuss we had was this way — Joe Mixer drove down from Gisborne portage one Sat'day night. Joe always carries a big roll, and trouble naturally follows in his train. A cantankerous cuss! We had a woman living here then called Cleopatra. Know her?"

"No," said Nell.

"Nothing like your class, of course," said Cal politely. "A black-haired woman from Kimowin way. Say, she had a face you could break rocks on! She lived in one of them shacks yonder. I never did hold by a woman living alone in camp. Not that it's the woman's fault; but she's got to have a protector. Now the girls at Maroney's, that's different. Maroney's got to look after them. He's got to keep up the reputation of his hotel. I knew this Cleopatra would be the cause of trouble; but here she was, and I hadn't no way of sending her out in the winter. She and Joe Mixer were old friends, and so, when he began to get loaded, he give her his roll to keep for him. A few hours later, being fully loaded by that time, he asked for it again, and she said he'd drunk it all up in her house. Joe went out and got his team, hooked up to the corner of her shack, and started to pull the whole caboodle over. Cleopatra, she snatched up a gun and let fly at him. She missed Joe and hit a fellow called Frenchy, who was taking her part. He wasn't bad hurt, though.

"Well, seems like at the sound of that shot all hell broke loose in this camp. Fighting broke out simultaneous everywhere, some taking Joe's part and some the woman's. We collared Joe and locked him up in a room in the hotel, but they fought on just the same without him. Let me see, how did it go? Mark Shand called himself Joe's champeen, but Frenchy's brother laid him out. Then Pat Radigan knocked out Frenchy's brother. Then Cleopatra sicked a Swede on Pat. Then, later, the Swede got fighting with another Swede, both near paralyzed with squirrel whisky. They opened their knives and cut each other so bad one died and the other got the T. B. We give the dead one an elegant funeral; but the affair gave Fort Edward a bad name, just the same. However, we're living it down! We're livin' it down!"

Cal jerked up his horses with an oath. Ann saw with horror what appeared to be a dead man lying athwart the road in one of the drier places.

"Here, you fellows!" roared the incensed mayor. "Roll him to one side, can't you? Nice thing, sleeping it off right in the middle of the main street! Another one of them Swedes," he added deprecatingly, to Nell. "Those fellows ain't got no sense of decency!"

The obstruction having been removed, they proceeded.

A little farther along they came upon a man strangely possessed. Staggering wildly in a circle, his aim seemed to be to butt his brains out against the log wall of a building hard by.

"Squirrel whisky," said Cal laconically.

He handed the reins to Nell, and jumped out. Several of the bystanders seized the man and held him, while the mayor went through his pockets. Cal held up a big, showy watch and a clasp knife.

"You see, fellows, I got his watch and his knife," he said. "Let him come to me and claim them when he's slept it off."

They drove on. Nell took these incidents as a matter of course. Ann's eyes were big.

The democrat drew up in front of the conspicuous two-story house which had a sign across it:

FORT EDWARD HOTEL—J. MARONEY

Here Ann discovered that there were other women in Fort Edward. Four girls came to the door of the hotel, clad in babyish silk dresses, their painted faces showing hideous in the daylight. They displayed an air of humility toward the scornful Nell that was rather piteous. Ann shivered, and searched their faces, without finding any answer to the riddle.

The building was in two parts—the newer, two-story structure of staring pine boards, and, adjoining this, a long, low shed without windows, built of logs. There was a wide wooden sidewalk or platform in front of the whole edifice, and there were two doors, one leading to the new part, one to the old. It was by far the most imposing structure in Fort Edward.

Everybody piled through the door into the old part of the building, leaving Ann at a loss on the sidewalk.

Peeping in through the door by which they had entered, she saw a long, dim room with lamps burning, tables around the walls, and a clear space in the middle, evidently for dancing. There was a bar across one end. Nellie, in a chair, was in the act of being lifted to one of the tables. Bottles and glasses were being thumped on the bar, and a loud noise of conviviality came out through the door.

Ann, not acquainted with the etiquette of such a place, dared not enter. She longed for a mantle of invisibility.

She tried the other door. It admitted her to a smaller room, a sort of office or lobby. There was a pool table in the middle, and a rough pine desk at one side. In the far corner, beside a window, there was a man hunched in a chair, with his feet up on the sill. His head was bent over a dog-eared magazine in his lap. He had a strange look sitting there by himself, when every other man in town was celebrating Nellie.

Ann coughed. He threw her a careless glance, and went on reading. He was young, and had a face extraordinarily full of life.

"Can I get a room here?" Ann asked timidly.

"I don't run the joint," he said indifferently, without looking around again.

His voice, to a woman, sounded thrillingly deep and resonant.

Ann sat down by the desk, to wait for somebody else to come. Time passed. She studied the young man through her lashes. All she got of his face was an oblique view across one cheek, with the end of his nose projecting beyond. There was a natural grace in his slumped attitude in the chair. His legs were long, and a swelling calf was revealed within the dandified Strathcona boots he was wearing—well polished boots, with soft uppers to the knee, and elaborate lacing. A broad-brimmed felt hat was cocked askew on his head, the crown pinched to a point.

There was a door into the adjoining dance hall. Though it was closed, the sounds of merrymaking within were obvious enough. Ann began to suspect that the young man's air of extreme indifference was all a parade. There was nothing of the Puritan about him. It did not seem natural for him to be sitting there alone.

He rose, finally, and, tossing the magazine on a table, stretched himself as frankly as an animal. With his legs planted a little apart and his arms flung out, he was really a magnificent figure. His bare throat was like a column of ruddy marble. Ann saw that he was not above twenty-four. His eyes were as blue as the sea.

He threw her a curious glance, insulting in its indifference; but Ann did not mind. She rejoiced in the beauty of the youth, but it was nothing to her what he thought of her.

He sauntered part way toward the door into the dance hall, then returned to his chair. There was something immature in his face—an uncertainty of purpose, a strain of wildness. This, in connection with his visible strength and fire, was rather disquieting. You would never be able to tell about such a man, Ann thought. He would be likely to fly off on any unexpected tangent, and, whichever way he went, his impetus would be tremendous.

Voices in the dance hall approached the door. The young man plumped down in his seat again. Ann was sure, then, that his grand indifference was a pose. The door opened, admitting Nell and a great burst of voices behind her. She turned in the doorway, saying:

"See you later, boys!"

The door was closed, putting a damper on the noise.

There was a man with Nell, carrying her suit case—a fat man, whose forehead ran back to the middle of his crown, where it was stopped by a little precipice of black hair. He wore a very dirty apron, and his face was greasy with complacency.

The young man never turned around when Nell came into the room. How strange, Ann thought, that the best-looking man in Fort Edward should go out of his way to ignore the Queen of North Cariboo! It was certainly a studied affront. Nell evidently thought so, for, seeing him, she stopped abruptly. Her face showed no change, but Ann marked the way her neck turned pink under the ears.

The young man casually turned his head.

"Hello, Nell!" he drawled.

Ann burned with indignation.

"I'd slap his face!" she thought.

Nell betrayed no heat.

"Why, hello, Chako!" she said, in a voice that had the tinkle of breaking icicles. "I wondered where you were."

The young man rose lazily.

"I don't hunt with the pack," he said.

Nell looked him up and down with an enigmatic smile.

"Heavens! What a handsome pair!" Ann thought.

"You've grown, Chako," Nell drawled. "Almost a man, aren't you?"

The young man, taken aback, stared at her with gathering fury. Before he could get an effective answer out, Nell had started briskly for the stairs at the back.

"Show me a room, Maroney," she said peremptorily.

Ann snatched up her valise and followed them. As they mounted, the young man went into the dance hall, making the whole house shake with the slam of the door. Nell, on the stairs ahead of Ann, raised one shoulder and laughed.

III

The following days, to Ann, were like a fascinating and inexplicable dream. More truly, perhaps, they were like a sensational drama, at which she had the poorest seat in the house; for she obtained only glimpses of the action and tantalizing snatches of dialogue.

The main stage was presumably the dance hall, which Ann dared not enter; but the whole house seemed to vibrate with mystery and intrigue. There were arrivals and departures at all hours; scurrying and giggling in the corridors; violent altercations in distant rooms; endless whispered conversations in out-of-the-way corners.

One night, on the river bank, below her window, Ann heard the sounds of a woman's hurried, repressed sobbing, and the fierce whispering of an exasperated man. What would she not have given for the key to it all?

In the dance hall there was an orchestra consisting of two banjos, a piano, and a drum. The rollicking strains they sent up drove the solitary Ann half distracted.

"I could go down and dance without taking any hurt from it," she told herself.

Nevertheless, the invisible bars across the doorway into the dance hall remained up.

There was singing, too, but Ann did not so much regret missing that. She could picture those poor girls mouthing and smirking. There was one better voice. Ann supposed it to be Nell's from the violence of the applause that greeted it.

From time to time Ann saw Nell flitting between the hotel and the dance hall. Nell's stage clothes had nothing in common, of course, with the abbreviated Mother Hubbards worn by the regular girls. Nell's dresses were expensive and marvelous; there was no end to them. Nevertheless, Ann considered her less alluring in her make-up.

Ann was glad to see that Nell never lost her contemptuous self-possession. She was the cause of a vast consumption of Maroney's liquor, but none of it was for her.

There was no regularity in the revels. From the hour of Nell's arrival, the racket kept up for twenty-four hours around the clock without stopping; then the dance hall closed for the night, presumably to give everybody a needed sleep. Early on the second morning it started up again, ran full blast all day and half the night, and started the third day at dinner time.

The roisterers made no distinction between day and night, and the fun might run just as high at noon as at midnight. At intervals it would be interrupted by a fight. Then somebody would get thrown out on the sidewalk with a crash, and the thrumming banjos would resume again. When customers of more importance got ugly, they would be assisted upstairs and locked in a room until they quieted down.

During these first few days Ann was like a little ghost in the house that everybody passed without seeing. Not to be allowed to share in all the running to and fro, the simmering excitement, the gusty laughter, was hard on her young spirit. It was not any moral sense that restrained her, but she just didn't know how to get into it.

Her favorite post was the chair alongside the desk in the lobby, where she could glance into the dance hall when the door was opened. She got fascinating glimpses of a murky interior, with one face — an amazing face, perhaps—thrown into strong relief by the light of a lamp. She could never find Nell in these glimpses.

By degrees she learned that Nell never mixed with the common throng. Nell had her own little salon adjoining the dance hall, where she received privileged friends. Ann marked the door through which all the champagne was carried.

When they passed in the hotel, Nell always ignored Ann. This hurt the latter, though she dimly understood that it might be due to a sort of delicacy on Nell's part. Ann longed for an opportunity to assure the other girl that there was no necessity for such a feeling.

The two girls were lodged in different parts of the house. Nell had the principal chamber at the head of the stairs. Once, as Ann came up, the door was standing open, and she made bold to step in. Nell was busy before the mirror.

" Hello!" said Ann.

Nell turned a cold face without speaking. Ann felt pretty small.

" What's the matter?" she asked.

Nell wriggled her pretty shoulders in annoyance.

" Oh, Lord! Have we got to have a fuss?" she said.

" Why, no," replied Ann quickly. " I'm not the kind that fusses. But aren't we friends?"

" No," said Nell curtly. " I'm working now," she added. " I should think you would understand what I mean. How can we be friends?"

" I just wanted to tell you I don't mind —things," Ann murmured a little lamely. " I just wanted to understand."

" The less you understand the better for you," said Nell cynically. " Oh, hell!" she went on in a friendlier voice. " I know you're not one of the holy, stuck-up kind, kid; but what's the use? I suppose you don't want a job like mine?"

" No," said Ann.

" Then there's nothing to it. We've just got to give each other the polite go-by. No hard feelings on either side."

" I suppose you're right," Ann said regretfully; " but I'm sorry. Good luck to you!" she added, and turned to go.

" Same to you!" said Nell, with a warm flash of the brown eyes. " You're a dandy kid!"

Ann felt curiously flattered. It was something to win the approval of the scornful Nell; but they did not speak to each other again.

The tall, blond youth was much in Ann's thoughts. What an odd name he had—Chako! He did not live in the hotel, and Ann obtained only fleeting glimpses of him on his way to and from the dance hall. He carried himself as if he owned Fort Edward and all that it contained.

Ann observed that most of the men seemed to cringe to him a little. What she desired most of all was to see him and Nell together again. Those two struck sparks from each other!

One night Nell came into the hotel dining room, bringing with her the red-haired Hercules whom Ann had noticed on the occasion of the mock ambuscade. He was a handsome man of his type, confident and good-natured. He was quite grandly dressed in a three-piece store suit, boiled shirt, and satin tie.

There was but the one long table, and the two sat down almost opposite Ann. How thrilling it was to observe the man's obvious infatuation, and to mark how Nell alternately led him on with her sleepy, soft brown eyes, and checked him with her contemptuous smile! There was something dangerous about the man, but Nell was not in the least intimidated.

Ann could hear their conversation, but it was not brilliant. She told herself that it was not what people said to each other that mattered, but the unspoken things that passed from eye to eye.

" Why don't you settle down here, Nell?" the red-haired man asked.

" Heavens, Red! This mudhole would give me the hump in a month!"

" No, but I mean get a stake here. She's bound to grow."

" So is the grass in the cemetery. Are you trying to sell me a lot, Red? Why don't you give me a couple?"

" Maybe I will."

" Now you're talking!"

A few minutes later Ann received a redoubled thrill when the blond young man —Chako—came into the dining room, with one of the dance hall girls hanging to his arm. Ann instantly made up her mind that he had brought the girl in to throw her in Nell's eye, so to speak. Here was a situation!

The girl was clearly infatuated with Chako. She was rather a piteous creature. She had put off her ridiculous working dress, and had washed her face. Her appearance was not much improved thereby, for she had no figure, and her cheap waist and skirt hung lankily on her bones. The pallor of her face seemed more unnatural than the artificial roses and lilies that usually decorated it. Her hair was hastily put up in a roll around the nape of her neck. She had nice eyes. When they turned on Chako, a complete self-abandonment showed in them.

"How terrible," thought Ann, "when one of those girls gets fond of a man! I wish I could make friends with her."

These two sat down at the other end of the table. If Chako had brought the girl for Nell's benefit, his ruse was scarcely a brilliant one, for he took no pains to conceal his scorn of his companion. He looked a little sulky and sheepish. How Ann regretted that she could not hear what they said to each other! The rumble of the young man's deep voice reached her down half the length of the table, strangely stirring the woman in her.

"Heavens!" she thought, smiling at her own sensations. "A man like that is dangerous to be at large. He's *too* good-looking. It isn't fair!"

Ann wondered if the truth might not be that Nell and Chako, each the most desirable of their sex, were secretly attracted to each other, and that each was too stubborn to give in. Perhaps there was bound to be an obscure sort of rivalry between two such people, each of whom was supreme. Whichever way it was, the drama was not to be played out just then, for Nell and her friend presently rose and left the room, without paying the slightest attention to the other couple.

That same night, as the lingering summer twilight was drawing to a close, Ann was sitting in her room, resentful at having to stay there, when a tremendous uproar arose in the dance hall below. A confused roaring of voices and tramping of feet came up. Women screamed; a table was overthrown; the music stopped in the middle of a bar.

Such a racket was not unusual, but to Ann this was the last straw. She determined to see what was going on. Slipping downstairs, she ran across the deserted office and boldly opened the door into the forbidden place.

A fight was in progress. The scene was like an old painting with strong contrasts of light and shadow. The middle part of the hall was built up higher than the sides. Under the ridgepole hung a row of big kerosene lamps, with thin shades reflecting the light downward. Thus the middle of the floor was brightly illuminated, while the sides were in a brown shadow, out of which faces showed queerly.

At first Ann could make out little of what was going on, the spectators milled around so. All that she could see was two more wildly bobbing heads in the center. On the outskirts Maroney, in his dirty apron, was brandishing both fists and bawling to the principals to settle their troubles outside. Other voices were shouting:

"Stand back! Give them a show!"

Gradually the crowd pressed back, and Ann saw the fighters. Chako was not in it, and the wild beating of her heart quieted down. One was the red-haired man who had sat opposite her at supper. Ann wondered if this was the price he had to pay for supping with Nellie Nairns. There was a smear of blood on the bosom of his white shirt, but it was not his blood, for his purple face was as yet unmarked.

His adversary was the swarthy, saturnine fellow whom Ann had marked at Ching's Landing. She had heard him called "Foxy." His face was as yellow as saffron, and his features were fixed in a devilish grin. Blood was running over his lips, and one blue sleeve was ripped from shoulder to cuff.

Ann, thinking of Nell, glanced toward the near corner of the hall. The door of Nell's room stood open, and Nell herself was framed in the doorway, with a strong light behind her. She had changed to a sort of gypsy costume, with a fringed shawl over her shoulders and a red scarf around her head. She was leaning against the door frame, with one hand negligently braced against the other side. The attitude suggested a calm interest in the scene.

Ann herself was revolted by the sight of blood, but the need to see, to know, was imperious. Little by little she was drawn into the hall. She mixed in the outer rank of the spectators, and no one noticed her.

To her it seemed as if Foxy was getting all the worst of the fight. He was lighter than the other man, and continually ran from him; but sometimes he stopped and delivered a blow which cracked like a shot under the roof, and jolted his antagonist sickeningly. The sallow man was beautiful in action, his tight trousers revealing the play of steely leg muscles. By comparison, the red Hercules moved like a dray horse.

Red flung his arms around Foxy's neck, and seemed bent on strangling him. There were some protests from the crowd. A man alongside Ann said to her, without noticing whom he addressed:

"Hell! Everything goes here, short of murder!"

In his efforts to free himself Foxy went down, with Red on top. Red seized hold of the other man's shoulders, and viciously banged his head against the floor. Several bystanders ran out and dragged Red off.

Foxy clambered to his feet, and stood swaying. Somebody dashed a glass of water in his face. He shook his black head like a dog, and the fixed grin returned.

The men who were holding Red released him; but as the two men once more approached each other, suddenly Maroney and his little gang of waiters and musicians came charging out of the shadows on the far side of the hall. The surprised fighters found themselves being hustled toward the door.

Instantly everybody took a hand in the scrimmage, and absolute pandemonium resulted. Ann stood back, both terrified and fascinated.

The initial momentum of Maroney's attack was sufficient to accomplish his purpose. The crowd stuck for a moment in the doorway, then suddenly drained out like water through a hole, leaving the hall empty.

Ann followed. Outside the door there was a bench, upon which she instinctively climbed. Though it was after ten o'clock, there was still a bit of light in the sky.

Wide though the walk was, the space was more restricted than inside, and the crowd gave the fighters the whole of it, gathering in groups at either end. Ann, on her bench, had the post of vantage like a referee. Nobody noticed her.

The end was not long deferred now. Foxy seemed to have acquired an access of strength from somewhere. With incredible quickness he dodged the heavier man's blows, ducking under his arms, spinning around, coming up behind him, and planting his own blows almost at will.

"Dancing master!" somebody yelled.

In a few moments he had Red swaying uncertainly. Finally, with a straight arm blow to the jaw, Foxy knocked his enemy clean off the sidewalk. The red-headed man fell in the mud with a great splash, and lay there groaning.

They hauled him up, and half carried, half led him to the bench. Ann jumped nimbly down and made haste to mix with the crowd.

Foxy, panting, stood by looking on, to make sure that he had finished his job. It was only too evident that he had. Red's head was lolling on his chest. Foxy, with a shrug, turned eagerly back into the hall. Cal Nimmo, the mayor, led him by the arm, and the crowd pushed after, cheering. Ann followed.

Inside the cheering was redoubled. Men ran around in front of the victor, striving to grasp his hand. Various admirers thrust his coat, his hat, his collar, upon him. Foxy and Cal pushed their way slowly toward the door of Nell's room, which stood invitingly open; but Nell was not visible.

Suddenly, from among the tables on the far side of the room, Chako strode into the full light. A frightened girl was pulling back on his arm; another had hold of his coat. It was obvious that Chako had been drinking. His fine features were a little thickened, his eyes looked recklessly irresponsible. There was a curious peaked furrow across his forehead, which gave him an aspect of terrible wrath.

"Chako! Chako!" the girls were gasping. "Don't make any more trouble! What do you care, Chako? For God's sake, come back!"

Chako roughly freed himself of his encumbrances. The girl who clung to his arm was sent reeling back into the shadows. The uproar surrounding Foxy was suddenly stilled. All eyes turned on Chako.

"Ah! You make me sick with your cheering!" he cried, with a violent thrust of his spread palm. His deep voice made the hall ring. "If it was Red who beat, you'd cheer him just the same! Always ready to lick the boots of the night's hero!"

No voice answered him. He strode up to Foxy.

"Red was *my* mark," he said. "I was waiting until he sobered up. You thought you had something easy, didn't you, taking him on when he was drunk? You've got to take me now!"

Foxy snarled in his yellow face, and gave ground.

"Big talk!" he said. "When you see a man's tired!"

A few other voices were raised on Foxy's behalf.

"Can't you see he's tired? He beat Red to a standstill."

"Shut up!" cried Chako, with startling violence. A pin might have been heard to drop. Chako laughed contemptuously. To Foxy he went on indifferently: "Take your own time; but don't put on too many airs—that's all!"

Chako turned, and went back to his table and his girls. Foxy, laughing with his friends, proceeded to the door of Nell's room.

Every one sought his former seat, and Ann suddenly found herself standing conspicuously alone. She slipped out of the hall, regained her own room, and went to bed, where she lay long, marveling at life.

She had no more than fallen asleep, it seemed to her, when she was awakened by another tumult in the dance hall. She heard the same hoarse voices and loud stamping, interrupted by the same strange periods of silence, with sudden outbursts of shouting. She sprang out of bed with her heart in her throat, thinking of the magnificent youth; but before her trembling fingers could get her hairpins in and her hooks fastened, the racket died down and the banjos resumed their thrumming. She went back to bed.

IV

Ann had not missed as much as she feared. In the morning she learned that Red Chivers, unexpectedly returning to the dance hall after his defeat, had attacked Foxy Nicholls, and this time had beaten Foxy to a finish.

Red had long been the undisputed champion of Fort Edward, and his defeat in the first battle had surprised everybody. It had only come about, they said, because he was so drunk that he could scarcely stand. Left alone after the first fight, he had gone to the river and plunged in, to sober up; then he had come back and redeemed his reputation.

Ann learned all this from Noll Voss at the breakfast table. She had to have some one who could interpret to her what was happening about her, so she had frankly made up to this respectable, diffident man, who came regularly to the hotel for his meals.

Their intercourse was beset with difficulties, for Noll had old-fashioned ideas about women, and disapproved of Ann's curiosity. In fact, it was his character to disapprove of most things. He was susceptible, however, and Ann made no scruple to exert a little fascination in order to obtain what she wanted. Noll was a dull, plain man of about forty—what Ann called the pathetic age in an unmarried man.

"But what were they fighting about?" asked Ann, though she knew well enough by intuition.

Noll looked severely disapproving.

"No good cause," he said.

"But I want to know," insisted Ann.

"Well," said Noll, "Red Chivers sets up to be Nellie Nairns's best friend here, and Foxy aimed to cut him out."

"Ah!" said Ann. "I heard that other young fellow—what do they call him—Chako?"

"Chako Lyllac," said Noll bitterly.

"I heard that Chako Lyllac had challenged Red, too."

"Pure devilishment!" said Noll. "He just can't abide that any man should be set ahead of him."

"Is this Chako a good fighter?" Ann asked offhand.

"Oh, he can fight," said Noll. "He's a firebrand—the worst of the lot. The only thing good about him is that he don't stay long anywhere. He comes and he goes."

"Where did he come from originally?" asked Ann.

"How do I know? He's been knocking about the North since he was a young boy. They say he ran away from school. Some say his father is a bishop."

"Very likely," said Ann, smiling. "Bishops have that kind of sons, they say."

"Chako Lyllac makes me sick," cried Noll, "with his drinking and his fighting and his swelling around!"

He would, Ann thought, glancing at the respectable man through her lashes.

"Where did he get that outlandish name?" she asked.

"The Indians gave it to him."

There was a little devil of curiosity in Ann that would not be appeased.

"Are Nellie Nairns and Chako old friends?" she asked.

"Not that I ever heard of," said Noll. "They're both wild birds. I suppose they meet different places, coming and going. What is it to you?" he added, with a suspicious glance.

"Nothing," said Ann, with a shrug. "The boy is so good-looking, one can't help feeling a little interested."

This was bitter to the plain man.

"Yah! So good-looking!" he snarled. "His good looks never brought no woman any good. He's a nuisance. Maroney would be glad enough to get him away from here."

"Why?" asked Ann.

"Ah! It ain't fit to be talked about!" said Noll.

"But I want to understand these things," said Ann.

Noll's bitterness overrode his customary prudence.

"All Maroney's girls are stuck on him," he said. "It spoils them; but Maroney can't throw him out, or they'd go on strike."

"I see!" said Ann.

This provided her with a deal of matter to think about. She presently resumed upon another tack.

"Weren't you in the hall last night?" she asked.

"I'm a workingman," said Noll, puffing out his cheeks. "There's few enough around here can say it. That's what's the matter with the place. They're all sitting around on their tails, waiting for the railway to come across the mountains and make 'em rich without working."

"It does you credit," said Ann demurely. She was gradually working around to the purpose she had in mind. "But in the evenings—"

"In the evenings I go to bed," said Noll.

"Don't you ever visit the dance hall? The music sounds attractive."

"Don't profit nobody I can see, except Maroney. He's getting rich off them poor fools."

"I'd like to go in some night," said Ann softly.

He looked at her aghast.

"You're joking!"

"Why shouldn't I go?"

"Look at the fights they have in there?"

"Oh, if there was any trouble, we could leave," said Ann—though she did not mean to do so.

"Any of them fellows would feel free to ask you to dance," protested Noll.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt me, would it?"

"You'd be labeled!"

"If anybody made any mistake about me, I could soon put them right," said Ann. "There are plenty of cabarets in the East. Everybody goes."

He merely stared at her.

"I'd rather go with you," Ann said insinuatingly. "You'd be such a good protector! If you won't take me, I'll have to find somebody else."

The moralist gulped, and struggled with himself.

"Well—well, I'll take you," he said desperately. "I'll take you, if you'll promise me you won't dance with any of them fellows."

"I'll promise that," said Ann. "We'll go to-night."

V

Ann wore her old sailor hat into the dance hall that night. A hat marked her off from all the other girls in the place, stamping her as a casual visitor. Noll Voss followed at her heels, wearing his Sunday suit and a rubber collar. His hair was carefully slicked down and brushed back over a finger. The respectable man was horridly uncomfortable.

As a matter of fact, their entrance did not create the sensation that he had feared. The people at the tables gave Ann a curious glance, and immediately resumed their talk.

"You see there's no harm in my coming," said Ann.

"I don't like it! I don't like it!" said Noll unhappily. "There's going to be trouble to-night!"

It was true that the unusual quietness of the place had an ominous effect. It was well filled, too. There was a great buzz of whispering at the tables. Everybody had an expectant eye on the entrance doors. Just inside the doors, the two biggest men on Maroney's staff had taken up their stand, and were scrutinizing all arrivals.

"What are those men there for?" asked Ann.

"To keep Chako Lyllac out," said Noll.

Ann led the way across the dance floor, and chose the end table on the other side.

It was about the best point of vantage in the place. The bar ran across that end of the room. At one end of the bar were the two entrance doors, one from the hotel and one from the outside. In the corner at the other end of the bar was the door of Nell's dressing room. It was closed.

Seated at their table, the two immediately dropped into a comfortable obscurity, and Noll Voss ceased to perspire. Ann had her opportunity, at last, to saturate herself in the strange atmosphere of the place, so different from anything she had known. No detail escaped her.

The curious construction of the dance hall was due, perhaps, to the fact that its builders did not know how to span a roof across a space as wide as they required. They had constructed a narrow hall, some fifteen feet high, and had then run up a lean-to down each side. Some time later, on the side toward the river, it had been found necessary to build a lean-to on the lean-to, to provide dressing rooms for the performers.

The high space in the middle was the dancing floor. It was surrounded by varnished pine posts. Behind the posts, under the low roofs of the lean-tos, were the tables. There were no windows, and the light from the kerosene lamps hanging from the ridgepole in the center left the tables in semidarkness.

The orchestra was at the end of the hall opposite the bar. The banjos presently started one of the rippling airs of which they had the secret, the piano thumping a two-chord accompaniment which never varied. Rollicking airs they played, which had long been out of fashion; but more than once, upon hearing them, a faint recollection had stirred within Ann. Perhaps they were songs that old people had sung to her in her babyhood.

A number of couples took the floor. There was nothing old-fashioned about the dancing, such as it was. It consisted of a lugubrious promenade around the floor, with a hitch to the left at mathematical intervals. There were not nearly enough girls for partners, and several pairs of men danced together with perfect gravity. It was all quite decorous.

Afterward one of the girls — a young woman with strange lemon-colored hair—took the center of the floor and proceeded to sing a sentimental song. This was a painful exhibition, and Ann averted her eyes from it. The poor girl's croaking voice was a dreadful mockery of music, and her efforts to please were tragic; but it was all eminently proper.

" There is no harm in this place," said Ann to her escort.

" There's trouble brewing," Noll muttered. " It's too quiet to-night!"

Maroney, the proprietor, seemed to share the same idea. The fat little man with the retreating pompadour moved uneasily around the edge of the floor, watching his customers narrowly, and keeping an anxious eye cocked toward the door. Cal Nimmo and several of his cronies had the next table to Ann, and Maroney continually returned there to air his grievances.

" They's been a fight here ev'y night!" he said. " Las' night they was two fights. I'm fed up with it. I ain't narrer-minded. I don't aim to interfere with nobody havin' a good time, but I say times ain't what they was in the old days. I say, if anybody wants to fight, they got to go outside. That's reasonable, ain't it?"

Maroney obtained but small sympathy from Cal.

" Ah, what do you care, Maroney?" said the mayor banteringly. " Makes everybody thirsty, don't it?"

" That's all right," said Maroney; " but somebody's goin' to get hurt in one of these scraps. Somebody's goin' to get done in some night. Then the news of it 'll travel outside, and they'll send in the police to make an investigation. God, if there's anything I hate, it's an investigation! They'll close me up—that's what they'll do; and then where'll you go for your fun?"

" Oh, if they close you, somebody else will open," said Cal.

Maroney became almost tearful.

" I got money in this place!" he cried. " Ain't I got no rights? You call yourself the mayor of this town. You had ought to help me keep order, instead of encouragin' them!"

" Your money is nothing to me, Maroney," said Cal coolly. " I ain't your hired bouncer. I like to see a good scrap myself, and your dance hall makes the best arena in town. My job is just to see that fair play is done."

" Well, there ain't goin' to be no scrap to-night!" cried Maroney passionately. " I told Chako Lyllac not to come back here. If he comes in that door, he'll be thrown out without a word said!"

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"Well, that 'll be a fight, at that," drawled Cal, amid the laughter of his friends.

The door into Nell's dressing room opened, and Nell appeared there, adjusting the skirt of a shimmering dress. She signaled to the bartender, who in turn whistled to the musicians. The banjoists played a sustained chord, and Nell walked smartly out on the floor, amid stormy applause. She passed close to Ann, but gave no sign of recognition. With her carmined cheeks, her smudged eyes, and her professional smile, she looked scarcely human. Ann had no sensation of beholding one who was familiar to her.

Nell sang an innocent little song called "Lonesome." She had not much voice, but she knew better than to force what she had. She was not engaged for her voice.

She was wearing a dress of silver cloth, simply and artfully made—gathered over the hips, and softly wrinkled about her lissom waist. Her strutting walk about the floor, while she sang, emphasized the lissomeness. Surely no such silvery apparition had ever before been seen in Fort Edward! Ann, watching the rough faces at the tables, and seeing how their eyes beamed, understood much, and was prepared to forgive much.

The tall, massive form of Red Chivers issued out of Nell's dressing room. He took up a conspicuous stand at the foot of the dance hall, in front of the bar, where he watched Nell with grinning delight and something of a proprietary air. He was sober to-night, and clad in his best—a sanguinary dandy.

Ann observed that Nell never looked at Red during the course of the song and the promenade. Nell's smile was all-embracing, and she never looked directly at anybody. There was a remoteness in the made-up eyes. Behind the posturing and the professional smile, Ann apprehended an inviolable personality.

Riotous applause greeted the end of the song. A shower of silver coins fell on the floor, and a few bills fluttered. Nell took no notice of these tributes. She bowed all around, and walked off. A waiter searched for the coins with a sharp eye, and pounced on them like a chicken pouncing on grains of corn.

With the disappearance of Nell the applause was redoubled. Every eye was on the door of her room. Above all the ordinary clapping could be heard the *clack, clack,* of Red Chivers's huge, hard palms.

Suddenly a similar sound was heard toward the other end of the hall, and heads turned that way. Chako Lyllac was seen standing out on the floor, clapping a pair of hands no less formidable than Red's.

An indrawn breath of astonishment was heard all about the hall. Maroney's two men were still holding the entrance door, and Chako's appearance in the middle of the hall seemed like magic. Glances traveling beyond him saw the door to the girl's dressing room standing open. That provided the explanation. He had been concealed in there. That room had windows through which he could have climbed.

The ordinary applause died away abruptly, but the two big men, their eyes fixed on each other, continued to beat their hands together. More than half the length of the room separated them.

Nell came out to the edge of the dance floor, and bowed. She gave no sign of seeing Chako. She returned to her room and closed the door.

Chako's legs were planted, his body was a little thrown back, his curly yellow pate was bare. It hurt Ann deep inside her to look at him. That curious peaked furrow ran across his brows. There was no boyish weakness in his face now, no humanity at all. He was the immemorial battler, so splendid, so strange to her, so inaccessible, that the sight of him seemed to crush Ann's very heart.

Red, with a swagger, turned toward Nell's door.

"Keep out of that room, Red," said Chako, not loudly.

Red turned with a grin.

"Hey?" he said.

"You heard me," said Chako.

"Have I got to beat you, kid?" drawled Red, looking around humorously at his friends.

"No—you've got to take a beating," said Chako, with unchanged face.

"Listen to what's talking!" returned Red, with affected mirth.

"Take off your coat," said Chako.

Ann's eyes flew from one to the other, measuring them. She was half sick with anxiety. Chako Lyllac was so much younger, so much finer than that coarse brute, how could he prevail in a brutal set-to? Both men appeared to be perfectly sober to-night.

"Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!" Noll Voss was gabbling at her side.

Ann felt as if the beating of her heart would kill her, but she shook her head.

"You must come!" said Noll, catching her arm. "It's not a fit sight—"

Ann's pleasant eyes flashed on him with surprising spirit.

"Be quiet!" she said. "I'm not going!"

Noll subsided sullenly.

Maroney had run out on the floor. To give him his due, he had courage.

"Get out of my place!" he cried to Chako. "I don't want you in here! Get out!"

Chako looked down at him as from a height.

"Back up, Maroney," he drawled. "If I hit you once, you'd burst!"

"Get out, I tell you!" cried Maroney. "Get out before you're thrown out!"

"If any man wants the job, let him try it," said Chako, looking around. "If you set more than one on me, I'll shoot!"

Cries of protest arose.

"Let them alone, Maroney! We won't stand for any interference. Let them fight it out!"

Maroney turned on them, brandishing his arms, beside himself with rage.

"Get out!" he cried. "All of you get out of my place! It's closed for the night!"

A roar of laughter answered him.

"Close up the bar!" Maroney shouted to his bartenders. "Put out the lights! The place is closed!"

They started to obey. Meanwhile Maroney ran to the last one of the three big lamps. These let up and down on lines that were fastened to the side posts. Maroney lowered the lamp, blew it out, and, taking it from its holder, handed it to a waiter to carry out.

While he was doing this, Chako and Red approached each other, their eyes holding in an unwavering grip. They were of the same height, but Red had about fifteen pounds on Chako. Some of the extra weight was around Red's waist, where it did not help him, while Chako's belly was as flat as a plank.

Moments seemed to pass while they faced each other motionless. A girl moaned hysterically. There was nervous laughter.

"Collide! Collide!" cried a man's voice.

"Want seconds, or a timekeeper?" Chako asked.

"To hell with it!" said Red. "You won't last a round!"

Chako struck at him like a cat. Eyes could not follow the blow, but they saw the red head jerked aside by the impact. Ceasing to smile, Red stepped back and swung his blacksmith's right. Chako sidestepped it. Maroney blew out the second light.

There was no running about in this fight. The two biggest men in Fort Edward stood up to each other and doggedly gave and took punishment. The impact of fist on flesh was like the crack of a snake whip. It was hard fighting, but it did not seem so dangerous at first. They stood so firmly planted that it seemed impossible either could injure the other.

Presently Chako reached Red's nose and it began to bleed. A curious murmur of satisfaction went round the hall. Ann was more horrified by that sound than by the sight of the blood.

Red, infuriated, showed his teeth, and cursed Chako thickly. Chako's face showed no expression whatever. His eyes were fathomless. Red fought furiously, always falling back to get space for his great swings, Chako following him up close with short-arm jabs. At length Red caught his enemy with a sledge hammer swing, and Chako went down. He fell on his hands, and scrambled clear. Wild yells broke from the onlookers.

Maroney blew out the last lamp. The yells ended in an angry groan. There was a rush for Maroney, but he and his waiter escaped in the dark, with the lamp.

The fighters had instinctively separated. It was not absolutely dark. The door into the girls' dressing room stood open, and a shaft of gray daylight came through. Somebody ran to open the front door and let in a little more light.

Cal Nimmo made his harsh voice heard above all the racket.

"Fellows! We can go to the Japanese restaurant. The Jap is game."

Red's voice answered thickly from somewhere:

"Ah! I can see him all I want."

"Suits me!" Chako agreed.

They rushed together. The crowd fell back behind the posts. In the murk the two figures no longer looked quite real. Their outlines were blurred; they seemed to float; they melted from one posture into another, like figures of smoke. Only the sound of Red's thick curses was horribly human. Chako uttered no sound.

They were so much of a size that it was impossible to tell which was which. The smack of their blows was less often heard now. Unable to hit each other effectively, they wrestled, standing for moments locked in a close embrace; but their sobbing breaths betrayed the strain.

They crashed to the floor. There was the sound of a dogged pummeling. The undermost figure thrashed wildly, and, still locked together, they began to roll. Over and over on the floor they went until they fetched up against the post beside which Ann was sitting. The upper part of their bodies went under the table. Ann jumped up and shoved it back.

The two figures separated and rose up. One backed off. The other brushed against Ann in rising. It was Chako. She knew that young head.

"Ah, fight hard! Fight hard!" she breathed involuntarily.

He precipitated himself like a flung stone on the waiting shadow out on the floor.

It could be made out that one man had changed his tactics. He continually retreated, refusing the clinches; and when the other opened his arms to embrace him, it was met with a blow. Over and over this trick was worked.

A confusion of cries arose from the invisible spectators.

"Red's got him going!"

"No, it's Chako!"

"Red's clinching to save himself!"

"It's Chako!"

In the end the bearlike one, whichever one it was, got the other in his hug. They crashed to the floor. It was down toward the rear of the hall. There was a furious struggle on the floor — rolling, thrashing, bumping, and pummeling. Then, quite suddenly, it ceased. One figure picked himself up, and the other lay there.

The end of the fight had come so unexpectedly that for a moment there was not a sound around the hall. Ann breathed a sort of prayer:

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Not the young one!"

Then the resonant voice of Chako was heard:

"Make a light, somebody. He's all in!"

It broke the tension. Sounds rippled around the hall again. Tears rolled down Ann's cheeks, and she began to shake inside. Somebody vaulted over the bar and struck a match. He found one of the small lamps there, and lighted it. It had a glass reflector behind it, which threw a shaft of light straight down the floor of the hall, revealing Chako standing there and looking down at Red Chivers.

Red raised himself on one hand. His head was hanging.

When the light came up, there was a fresh uproar. Some ran to pick up Red and drag him to one of the tables.

"Good boy, Chako!" somebody yelled.

A chorus took it up. Men and women started for him.

"Keep away from me!" cried Chako, with that contemptuous thrust of his open palm. He seemed to grow bigger in his scorn. "Shut your heads, you fools! I'm no man of yours!"

They fell back. The admiring atmosphere became hostile; but it was all one to Chako. He started down the hall.

Suddenly Ann saw Nell slip by her. Chako and the girl met midway on the dance floor. They had a clear space there to themselves. Everybody watched intently, but none cared to venture close.

Ann was mad to hear what those two had to say to each other. It seemed to her that the whole meaning of what had happened would be lost to her if she did not hear. Swiftly as a darting lizard she circled behind the tables in the dark, and came to the post nearest to where they stood. She flattened herself against it.

"Thanks, old man," she heard Nell drawl in her cool tones. "He was a coarse brute!"

"That's all right," Chako muttered.

"But what did *you* do it for?" Nell asked curiously.

"Ah!" growled Chako. "He was too well satisfied with himself. I couldn't stand it!"

Nell laughed.

"You don't want me," she said.

"No," said Chako bluntly. "Too many after you. If you'd come away with me—north, where there's nobody—"

"No," said Nell. "You and I weren't made for each other. Both too much run after, I expect."

"You shouldn't have come out here to me," Chako growled. "I don't want to seem to turn you down before these swine."

Nell laughed again.

"A fat lot I care what *they* think!" she said. "Shake hands to show there's no hard feeling, and let's call it a night!"

Ann peeped around the post. She saw the couple oddly lighted up in the horizontal rays from the light on the bar. Their shadows reached down to the far end of the room. Nell laid her hand within Chako's. She was laughing up into his eyes, and Chako was scowling somberly down upon hers.

" By God, Nell, you're handsome!" he rumbled.

" Thanks!" said Nell, showing her beautiful white teeth.

She ran back to her room. Chako stood watching her with troubled eyes until she disappeared. Then he looked around him. Seeing his coat where he had flung it, he picked it up and wriggled it over his shoulders. Without looking to the right or the left, he made his way to the entrance door and went out.

As soon as he had gone, the whispering started up. A sniggering laugh went around, and there was a loud guffaw. The sneer expressed in these sounds made Ann shiver. The frequenters of Maroney's place did not understand, and what they did not understand they hated.

Thirty seconds after Chako had gone, the usual empty clatter of talk and laughter filled the place. It was as if nothing had happened. The banjos were tuning up again. Maroney unconcernedly brought the lamps back, and the waiters darted to and fro across the floor with fresh rounds of drinks.

Ann's sole thought, now, was of escaping. She had had her fill of the dance hall. It could never tempt her again. She was done forever with the rôle of a spectator of life. Sitting on the bank, feeling herself safe, and watching the rapids course by, she had suddenly been sucked in, and now she was being hurried down helplessly she knew not to what end. She was terrified half out of her wits by the violence of the emotions that seized her and shook her till she turned faint. She could not think or understand. Her instinct was only to get by herself, to hide herself.

She waited until the music started, and the dancers provided a little cover for her retreat. Then, with a muttered word to Noll Voss, she slipped across the floor and gained the hotel. She never waited to see whether her escort accompanied her. She flew upstairs, and, thankfully gaining her own room, flung herself face down on her bed.

" Ah, if he would come north with *me!*" she whispered, pressing her face into the pillow. " If he would come north with me! Oh, I am mad! But if he would only come with me!"

VI

To effect her purpose in coming to North Cariboo, Ann required the help of a man; but she found Fort Edward so violent and strange in all its ways that she allowed the first days to slip by without making any effort to become acquainted with the right sort of man.

There was Noll Voss, but he would never do. Her instinct warned her not to tell him what she had come for. A well-meaning man, he was not a true son of the woods, but a settler. Moreover, his notions about women were both absurd and aggravating. In her mind's eye, Ann could see the look of horror that would overspread his face if she proposed that they should take a trip into the wilds together. And if she did go with him, she couldn't trust him. Notwithstanding his moral ideas, there was something shifty in Noll.

From the first Ann had marked Cal Nimmo, the mayor, as a good man to go to for advice. There was something reassuring in the hardness, the squareness, the good humor expressed in Cal's weather-beaten countenance. He was rather a terrible figure, too, with his cynical grimness, his air of no nonsense, and it required a good deal of resolution for Ann to nerve herself to the point of addressing him.

In the days following the return of Nellie Nairns, Cal seemed extraordinarily busy. Ann had had only glimpses of him on the wing to and from the dance hall. She couldn't very well follow him in there, and no other opportunity to speak to him had presented itself.

Then came the night when Ann was torn up by the roots, as it seemed to her. After that nothing in her life had the same significance as before.

On the morning after the fight in the dance hall she drifted downstairs from her room a little earlier than usual. The hotel was wrapped in a quilt of silence. Even in the kitchen the business of the day had not commenced.

Ann went outside. The sun had been up for hours; it was like midday in more southerly latitudes. It had been a big night in Fort Edward, and no creature stirred now. It was like a camp of the dead in broad day.

To Ann, after the violent upheavals of the night, the very world seemed changed—and for the worse. She was worn out, yet the demon of unrest pursued her, and she could not keep still.

She drifted along the main street of the settlement—they called it Dominion Avenue, when they remembered. It ran straight across the blunt, shallow peninsula on which Fort Edward was built, touching the Boardman River on one side and the Campbell on the other. It had been laid off a hundred feet wide, but the stumps had never been cleared out of it, and the tangled skeins of wagon tracks twisted among them as crookedly as rivulets in loose sand. It was something of an undertaking for a foot passenger to get from one side to the other.

The street was really distinguished in its ugliness. The closely built structures down each side were not all of a type, for old log buildings rubbed elbows with pert new clapboarded stores with false fronts.

Ann saw more than one sprawling figure in the merciless sunlight. She was getting used to that. She looked diffidently in their faces, but she did not see the face she feared to see. Yet in her heart she hoped that drunkenness had laid Chako by the heels somewhere; for her secret terror was that he had flown straight out of Maroney's to the north, like the wild bird he was. Out of her reach forever!

She searched the face of each ugly building with pain. If only she could know that one of them held Chako safe for the moment, she could rest.

Noll Voss turned up at the hotel for breakfast, as usual. Never had Ann been so glad to see him. She had to get information from somebody, or she would go wild; but Noll was sulky.

"You gave me the slip last night," he said.

"It was too terrible!" Ann told him. "I ran to my room."

"Not till the trouble was over!" said Noll bitterly.

"What became of Chako Lyllac?" Ann asked with bated breath.

"Chako Lyllac! Chako Lyllac!" snarled Noll. "I suppose you think he's quite a hero—like all the other women!"

Noll's feelings were of small moment to Ann.

"I asked you a civil question," she said coldly.

"I'll tell you what happened to Chako Lyllac!" he cried. "When he left here, he went to Siwash Jimmy's place, the lowest den in town. He filled up on squirrel whisky, and went crazy and wrecked the place. They sent up here for Cal Nimmo. It took six of them to hold him down. They locked him in a shed at Cal's place to sleep it off. There's your hero for you!"

Ann was conscious only of relief. He had not gone beyond reach!

"If you cannot speak civilly—" she said coldly.

Noll suspected that she was using him, but he could not resist her. He came crawling, as Ann knew he would.

"Ah! I didn't mean nothing against you," he muttered. "That young waster just makes me mad!"

"Cal Nimmo is his friend," murmured Ann.

"About the only friend he's got," said Noll.

How Ann's breast warmed toward the hard-faced mayor! She resolved not to let that morning pass without speaking to him. Meanwhile she mercilessly plied Noll Voss with questions, and Noll, willy-nilly, had to answer.

"I suppose Chako Lyllac will soon be leaving here?"

"As soon as his money's spent."

"Where will he go?"

"You can search me!"

"But I suppose he has to make his living somehow?"

"Oh, he works off and on—river work with parties going up the Campbell or down the Spirit."

"Are any parties getting ready to go on the rivers now?"

"Not that I know of. It's getting late."

"What will he do, then?"

"Oh, go off to his friends the Indians, I suppose."

"But he must spend a lot of money here. Where does he get it?"

"He brings out a bunch of fur every spring. Traps all winter, and then he can't rest till he's drunk it all up!"

After breakfast Ann boldly carried a chair out on the platform, prepared to wait there all day, if necessary, until Cal Nimmo came along. Noll Voss hung about her abjectly. She tolerated him. He was still useful to her.

After all, it proved to be no hard matter at all. All she had to do was to stand up and say:

"Mr. Nimmo, can I have a talk with you?"

Cal snatched the hat off his bullet head. His keen eyes bored her through.

"Why, sure, miss," he said. "Let's go inside."

He had the natural good manners that result from perfect assurance.

They stood by the side window at the rear of the room.

"I've been wanting to talk to you ever since I came," said Ann; "but you always seemed so busy."

"Busy! Sho!" said Cal. "What does it amount to!"

"It's about my reason for coming here," said Ann.

"I wondered about that myself," said Cal; "but it's a free country. There wasn't no call for me to ask you."

"I'm looking for my father, Joseph Maury," Ann told him.

"Never heard the name," said Cal.

"Surely you must have heard of him!" said Ann, surprised. "He's been in this country many years. Every year I have had a letter from him, and it was always mailed in this place."

"That's easy explained," said Cal. "I suppose he goes among us under some other name."

"But why should he?"

Cal shrugged.

"We got some queer cusses up here," he said dryly. He pulled up chairs. "Sit down, miss. What sort of looking man is your father?"

"I never saw him," replied Ann. "I know him only by his letters."

"H-m!" said Cal. "Then any one of us might be the man, for all you know—even me!"

"I wish it were you, Mr. Nimmo," Ann boldly declared.

Cal grinned delightedly.

"Same here," he said heartily; "but no such luck for me!"

"In the winters he trapped furs," Ann went on, "and in the summers he prospected for gold; but he never found any gold, he said."

"The usual story," remarked Cal.

"Every spring he brought his furs out to Fort Edward, sold them, bought his supplies, and went back."

It presently appeared that Ann had her father's last letter. She read it to Cal.

Dear Daughter:

I hope this finds you well. I am about the same as usual. I got your letter. I am glad you are well. I was late this year getting out. We had such unseasonable warm weather the snow in the mountains melted early, and the rivers were in flood. I capsized twice, but I did not lose my catch. I got a touch of fever from getting wet and all, and had to spell a couple of days.

I had good fur this year. After paying for everything I had a hundred dollars' credit left. I send you a post office order herewith. It ought to be twice as much. The traders here are both robbers. They're in cahoots with each other. So no more at present from

Your sincere father,
Joseph Maury.

Cal struck his fist into his palm.

"I have it!" he cried. "Joe Grouser—that's what we called him. It was that touch about the traders being robbers. That's Joe Grouser! When was that letter dated?"

"Two years ago in June."

"That's right! That's the last time he was here. When he didn't show up last year, there was some talk about it, but the traders here supposed he had carried his fur down the Spirit River. He had often threatened to do it."

"Tell me more about him," murmured Ann.

"Well, of all the queer ones he was one of the queerest," said Cal reminiscently. "Every year he'd come floating down the Campbell on a little raft, with his catch. Every year he'd have a hell of a row with the traders over the price, and carry his fur from one to the other and back again. As a matter of fact, Joe Grouser always got the best price going, because he wasn't in debt to the traders. Then he'd buy his year's grub, and quietly sit around getting drunk every day until the steamboat went up the river. She'd carry him and his outfit to Gisborne Portage, Joe Mixer would put him across, and we wouldn't see nor hear of him for another year.

"He was a dogged man. Every year he carried in more than half a ton of grub without any help. He'd built himself a good-sized skiff, and he'd track that heavy boat all the way up the Rice River, the Pony River, and the Little River, and him not a big man, at that—two hundred and fifty miles, and how much farther I don't know. Going in with his grub it was easier, downstream work; but when he got to the Grand Forks of the Spirit, he went on up the Stanley. He was a strong-hearted man, whatever you may say. Nobody knew just where he ranged. He was secret as a clam. No traveler, no Indian, ever came upon his camp."

"What a life!" murmured Ann.

"You're right," agreed Cal. "What a life!"

"But you were his friend."

"As much his friend as he would let me," said Cal. "The fact was, he hadn't no use for any man. He'd tell us to our faces what he thought of us, and it wasn't complimentary; but nobody got sore, because he was Joe Grouser, see? He was thorough. Nothing ever suited him. The country, the weather, his luck, life itself—all rotten!"

There were tears in Ann's eyes.

"How unhappy he must have been!"

"Well, I don't know," said Cal. "When he was grousing away, there was a sort of brightness in his eye. Certainly he got a satisfaction out of being different from everybody else."

"What did he look like?" asked Ann.

"Nothing remarkable," said Cal. "He was a smallish man with a mistrustful, wide open eye, like a bird's. Of late years he was somewhat withered up. He wore the batteredest felt hat in the country, and always had the stub of a clay pipe under his nose. When he came floating down the river, sitting on top of his bale of fur, he was all of a color with the dead logs of his raft. You had to look twice to see him at all."

"And yet, in my village at home, they still tell what a handsome man he was when he courted my mother, and how full of life!"

"Ah, well, time plays the devil with us all," said Cal, grinning; "specially the gamy ones."

"How should I set about finding him?" asked Ann simply.

Cal looked grave.

"That's quite a job," he said. "We'll talk it over again. First off I want to make some inquiries. There are some fellows here who come up from Spirit River Crossing. They'll know if he went down that way. I'll see you again this afternoon."

Ann's heart beat fast. It was terribly hard for her to drop the matter, even for an hour or two, without having broached that which was far more to her than a father whom she had never seen.

"The man's eyes are keen," she thought. "I must be careful!"

She ventured to say a little breathlessly:

"Shall I come to your house?"

"No, no," said Cal quickly. "No fit place to receive a lady. I'll see you here."

He bowed to her gallantly, and went to join the men outside.

(*To be continued in the March number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

A HOUSE OF DREAMS

DESERTED stands the manse in its demesne;
Its clapboard sides have weathered silver-gray,
And on its roof, where sunshine falls, you may
See shingles tinct with lichen's misty green.

The old sundial near the gate is seen,
Whose finger still points to the time of day;
But everywhere the signs of slow decay
Now mark the stateliness that once had been.

Moving like phantoms out of long ago,
In the great linden's flickering shade I seem
To see a man and maid in lovers' talk;

To hear, in leaves that patter on the walk,
Their footfalls as a well remembered dream;
In wind-stirred foliage, their voices low.

F. L. Montgomery

Spurs

THE STORY OF JACQUES COURBÉ, THE DWARF OF COPO'S CIRCUS, AND JEANNE MARIE, BAREBACK RIDER

By Tod Robbins

JACQUES COURBÉ was a romanticist. He measured only twenty-eight inches from the soles of his diminutive feet to the crown of his head; but there were times, as he rode into the arena on his gallant charger, St. Eustache, when he felt himself a doughty knight of old about to do battle for his lady.

What matter that St. Eustache was not a gallant charger except in his master's imagination—not even a pony, indeed, but a large dog of a nondescript breed, with the long snout and upstanding ears of a wolf? What matter that M. Courbé's entrance was invariably greeted with shouts of derisive laughter and bombardment of banana skins and orange peels? What matter that he had no lady, and that his daring deeds were severely curtailed to a mimicry of the bareback riders who preceded him? What mattered all these things to the tiny man who lived in dreams, and who resolutely closed his shoe button eyes to the drab realities of life?

The dwarf had no friends among the other freaks in Copo's Circus. They considered him ill-tempered and egotistical, and he loathed them for their acceptance of things as they were.

Imagination was the armor that protected him from the curious glances of a cruel, gaping world, from the stinging lash of ridicule, from the bombardments of banana skins and orange peels. Without it, he must have shriveled up and died. But these others? Ah, they had no armor except their own thick hides! The door that opened on the kingdom of imagination was closed and locked to them; and although they did not wish to open this door, although they did not miss what lay beyond it, they resented and mistrusted any one who possessed the key.

Now it came about, after many humiliating performances in the arena, made palatable only by dreams, that love entered the circus tent and beckoned commandingly to M. Jacques Courbé. In an instant the dwarf was engulfed in a sea of wild, tumultuous passion.

Mlle. Jeanne Marie was a daring bareback rider. It made M. Jacques Courbé's tiny heart stand still to see her that first night of her appearance in the arena, performing brilliantly on the broad back of her aged mare, Sappho. She was a tall, blond woman of the amazon type. She had big, round eyes of baby blue, which held no spark of her avaricious peasant's soul, carmine lips and cheeks, large white teeth, which flashed continually in a smile, and hands which, when doubled up, were nearly the size of the dwarf's head.

Her partner in the act was Simon Lafleur, the *Romeo* of the circus tent—a swarthy, herculean young man with bold black eyes and hair that glistened with grease, like the back of Solon, the trained seal.

From that first performance M. Jacques Courbé loved Mlle. Jeanne Marie. All his tiny body was shaken with longing for her. Her buxom charms, so generously revealed in tights and spangles, made him flush and cast down his eyes. The familiarities allowed to Simon Lafleur during the course of their act, the bodily acrobatic contacts of the two performers, made the dwarf's blood boil. Mounted on St. Eustache, awaiting his turn at the entrance, he would grind his teeth in impotent rage to see Simon circling round and round the ring, standing proudly on the back of Sappho and holding Mlle. Jeanne Marie in an ecstatic embrace, while she kicked one shapely bespangled leg skyward.

"Ah, the dog!" M. Jacques Courbé would mutter. "Some day I shall teach this hulking stable boy his place! *Ma foi,* I will clip his ears for him!"

St. Eustache did not share his master's admiration for Mlle. Jeanne Marie. From the first he evinced his hearty detestation for her by low growls and a ferocious display of long, sharp fangs.

It was little consolation for the dwarf to know that St. Eustache showed still more marked signs of rage when Simon Lafleur approached him. It pained M. Jacques Courbé to think that his gallant charger, his sole companion, his bedfellow, should not also love and admire the splendid giantess who each night risked life and limb before the awed populace. Often, when they were alone together, he would chide St. Eustache on his churlishness.

"Ah, you devil of a dog!" the dwarf would cry. "Why must you always growl and show your ugly teeth when the lovely Jeanne Marie condescends to notice you? Have you no feelings under your tough hide? Cur, she is an angel, and you snarl at her! Do you not remember how I found you, a starving puppy in a Paris gutter? And now you must threaten the hand of my princess! So this is your gratitude, great hairy pig!"

II

M. Jacques Courbé had one living relative—not a dwarf like himself, but a fine figure of a man, a prosperous farmer living just outside the town of Roubaix. The elder Courbé had never married; and so one day, when he was found dead from heart failure, his tiny nephew—for whom, it must be confessed, the farmer had always felt an instinctive aversion—fell heir to a comfortable property. When the tidings were brought to him, the dwarf threw both arms about the shaggy neck of St. Eustache and cried out:

"Ah, now we can retire, marry, and settle down, old friend! I am worth many times my weight in gold!"

That evening, as Mlle. Jeanne Marie was changing her gaudy costume after the performance, a light tap sounded on the door.

"Enter!" she called, believing it to be Simon Lafleur, who had promised to take her that evening to the Sign of the Wild Boar for a glass of white wine, to wash the sawdust out of her throat. "Enter, *mon chéri!*"

The door swung slowly open, and in stepped M. Jacques Courbé, very proud and upright, in the silks and laces of a courtier, with a tiny gold-hilted sword swinging at his hip. Up he came, his shoe button eyes all aglitter to see the more than partially revealed charms of his robust lady. Up he came to within a yard of where she sat, and down on one knee he went and pressed his lips to her red-slippered foot.

"Oh, most beautiful and daring lady," he cried, in a voice as shrill as a pin scratching on a window pane, "will you not take mercy on the unfortunate Jacques Courbé? He is hungry for your smiles, he is starving for your lips. All night long he tosses on his couch and dreams of Jeanne Marie!"

"What play acting is this, my brave little fellow?" she asked, bending down with the smile of an ogress. "Has Simon Lafleur sent you to tease me?"

"May the black plague have Simon!" the dwarf cried, his eyes seeming to flash blue sparks. "I am not play acting. It is only too true that I love you, *mademoiselle;* that I wish to make you my lady. And now that I have a fortune, now that—" He broke off suddenly, and his face drew up into angry wrinkles till it resembled a withered apple. "What is this, *mademoiselle?*" he said, in the low, droning tone of a hornet about to sting. "Do you laugh at my love? I warn you, *mademoiselle*—do not laugh at Jacques Courbé!"

Mlle. Jeanne Marie's large, florid face had turned purple from suppressed merriment. Her lips twitched at the corners. It was all she could do not to burst out into a roar of laughter.

Why, the ridiculous little manikin was serious in his love-making! This pocket-sized edition of a courtier was proposing marriage to her! He, this splinter of a fellow, wished to make her his wife! Why, she could carry him about on her shoulder like a trained marmoset!

What a joke this was—what a colossal, corset-creaking joke! Wait till she told Simon Lafleur! She could fairly see him throw back his sleek head, open his mouth to its widest dimensions, and shake with silent laughter; but *she* must not laugh—not now. First she must listen to everything the dwarf had to say, and draw all the sweetness out of this bonbon of humor before she crushed it under the heel of ridicule.

"I am not laughing, M. Courbé," she

managed to say. "You have taken me by surprise. I never thought, I never even guessed—"

"That is well, *mademoiselle,*" the dwarf broke in. "I do not tolerate laughter. In the arena I am paid to make laughter; but these others pay to laugh at *me.* I always make people pay to laugh at me!"

"But do I understand you aright, M. Courbé? Are you proposing an honorable marriage?"

The dwarf rested his hand lightly on his heart and bowed.

"Yes, *mademoiselle,* an honorable marriage, and the wherewithal to keep the wolf from the door. A week ago my uncle died and left me a large estate. We shall have a servant to wait on our wants, a horse and carriage, food and wine of the best, and leisure to amuse ourselves. And you? Why, you will be a fine lady! I will clothe that beautiful big body of yours with silks and laces. You will be as happy, *mademoiselle,* as a cherry tree in June!"

The dark blood slowly receded from Mlle. Jeanne Marie's full cheeks, her lips no longer twitched at the corners, her eyes had narrowed slightly. She had been a bareback rider for years, and she was weary of it. The life of the circus tent had lost its tinsel. She loved the dashing Simon Lafleur; but she knew well enough that this *Romeo* in tights would never espouse a dowerless girl.

The dwarf's words had woven themselves into a rich mental tapestry. She saw herself a proud lady, ruling over a country estate, and later welcoming Simon Lafleur with all the luxuries that were so near his heart. Simon would be overjoyed to marry into a country estate; and these pygmies were a puny lot. They died young! She would do nothing to hasten the end of Jacques Courbé. No, she would be kindness itself to the poor little fellow; but, on the other hand, she would not lose her beauty mourning for him.

"Nothing that you wish shall be withheld from you as long as you love me, *mademoiselle,*" the dwarf continued. "Your answer?"

Mlle. Jeanne Marie bent forward, and with a single movement of her powerful arms raised M. Jacques Courbé and placed him on her knee. For an ecstatic instant she held him thus, as if he were a large French doll, with his tiny sword cocked coquettishly out behind. Then she implanted on his cheek a huge kiss that covered his entire face from chin to brow.

"I am yours!" she murmured, pressing him to her ample bosom. "From the first I loved you, M. Jacques Courbé!"

III

THE wedding of Mlle. Jeanne Marie was celebrated in the town of Roubaix, where Copo's Circus had taken up its temporary quarters. Following the ceremony, a feast was served in one of the tents, which was attended by a whole galaxy of celebrities.

The bridegroom, his dark little face flushed with happiness and wine, sat at the head of the board. His chin was just above the tablecloth, so that his head looked like a large orange that had rolled off the fruit dish. Immediately beneath his dangling feet, St. Eustache, who had more than once evinced by deep growls his disapproval of the proceedings, now worried a bone with quick, sly glances from time to time at the plump legs of his new mistress.

Papa Copo was on the dwarf's right, his large round face as red and benevolent as a harvest moon. Next him sat Griffo, the giraffe boy, who was covered with spots, and whose neck was so long that he looked down on all the rest, including even M. Hercule Hippo, the giant. The rest of the company included Mlle. Lupa, who had sharp white teeth of an incredible length, and who growled when she tried to talk; the tiresome M. Jejongle, who insisted on juggling fruit, plates, and knives, although the whole company was heartily sick of his tricks; Mme. Samson, with her trained baby boa constrictors coiled about her neck and peeping out timidly, one above each ear; Simon Lafleur, and a score of others.

The bareback rider had laughed silently and almost continually ever since Jeanne Marie had told him of her engagement over a glass of white wine at the Sign of the Wild Boar. Now he sat next to her in his crimson tights, with his black hair brushed back from his forehead and so glistening with grease that it reflected the lights overhead, like a burnished helmet. From time to time he tossed off a brimming goblet of Burgundy, nudged the bride in the ribs with his elbow, and threw back his sleek head in another silent outburst of laughter.

"And you are sure that you will not forget me, Simon?" she whispered. "It may be some time before I can get the little ape's money."

"Forget you, Jeanne?" he muttered. "By all the dancing devils in champagne, never! I will wait as patiently as Job till you have fed that mouse some poisoned cheese. But what will you do with him in the meantime, Jeanne? You must allow him no liberties. I grind my teeth to think of you in his arms!"

The bride smiled, and regarded her diminutive husband with an appraising glance. What an atom of a man! And yet life might linger in his bones for a long time to come!

M. Jacques Courbé had allowed himself only one glass of wine, and yet he was far gone in intoxication. His tiny face was suffused with blood, and he stared at Simon Lafleur belligerently. Did he suspect the truth?

"Your husband is flushed with wine," the bareback rider whispered. *Ma foi, madame,* later he may knock you about! Possibly he is a dangerous fellow in his cups. Should he maltreat you, Jeanne, do not forget that you have a protector in Simon Lafleur."

"You clown!" Jeanne Marie rolled her large eyes roguishly, and laid her hand for an instant on the bareback rider's knee. "Simon, I could crack his skull between my finger and thumb, like this hickory nut!" She paused to illustrate her example, and then added reflectively: "And perhaps I shall do that very thing, if he attempts any familiarities. Ugh! The little ape turns my stomach!"

By now the wedding guests were beginning to show the effects of their potations. This was especially marked in the case of M. Jacques Courbé's associates in the side show.

Griffo, the giraffe boy, had closed his large brown eyes, and was swaying his small head languidly above the assembly, while a slightly supercilious expression drew his lips down at the corners. M. Hercule Hippo, swollen out by his libations to even more colossal proportions, was repeating over and over:

"I tell you I am not like other men. When I walk, the earth trembles!"

Mlle. Lupa, her hairy upper lip lifted above her long white teeth, was gnawing at a bone, growling unintelligible phrases to herself, and shooting savage, suspicious glances at her companions. M. Jejongle's hands had grown unsteady, and, as he insisted on juggling the knives and plates of each new course, broken bits of crockery littered the floor. Mme. Samson, uncoiling her necklace of baby boa constrictors, was feeding them lumps of sugar soaked in rum. M. Jacques Courbé had finished his second glass of wine, and was surveying the whispering Simon Lafleur through narrowed eyes.

There can be no genial companionship among great egotists who have drunk too much. Each one of these human oddities thought that he or she alone was responsible for the crowds that daily gathered at Copo's Circus; so now, heated with the good Burgundy, they were not slow in asserting themselves. Their separate egos rattled angrily together, like so many pebbles in a bag. Here was gunpowder which needed only a spark.

"I am a big—a very big man!" Hippo said sleepily. "Women love me. The pretty little creatures leave their pygmy husbands, so that they may come and stare at Hercule Hippo of Copo's Circus. Ha, and when they return home, they laugh at other men always! 'You may kiss me again when you grow up,' they tell their sweethearts."

"Fat bullock, here is one woman who has no love for you!" cried Mlle. Lupa, glaring sidewise at the giant over her bone. "That great carcass of yours is only so much food gone to waste. You have cheated the butcher, my friend. Fool, women do not come to see *you!* As well might they stare at the cattle being led through the street. Ah, no, they come from far and near to see one of their own sex who is not a cat!"

"Quite right," cried Papa Copo in a conciliatory tone, smiling and rubbing his hands together. "Not a cat, *mademoiselle,* but a wolf. Ah, you have a sense of humor! How droll!"

"I *have* a sense of humor," Mlle. Lupa agreed, returning to her bone, "and also sharp teeth. Let the erring hand not stray too near!"

"You, M. Hippo and Mlle. Lupa, are both wrong," said a voice which seemed to come from the roof. "Surely it is none other than me whom the people come to stare at!"

All raised their eyes to the supercilious face of Griffo, the giraffe boy, which swayed slowly from side to side on its long, pipestem neck. It was he who had spoken, although his eyes were still closed.

"Of all the colossal impudence!" cried the matronly Mme. Samson. "As if my little dears had nothing to say on the subject!" She picked up the two baby boa constrictors, which lay in drunken slumber on her lap, and shook them like whips at the wedding guests. "Papa Copo knows only too well that it is on account of these little charmers, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, that the side show is so well attended!"

The circus owner, thus directly appealed to, frowned in perplexity. He felt himself in a quandary. These freaks of his were difficult to handle. Why had he been fool enough to come to M. Jacques Courbé's wedding feast? Whatever he said would be used against him.

As Papa Copo hesitated, his round, red face wreathed in ingratiating smiles, the long deferred spark suddenly alighted in the powder. It all came about on account of the carelessness of M. Jejongle, who had become engrossed in the conversation, and wished to put in a word for himself. Absent-mindedly juggling two heavy plates and a spoon, he said in a petulant tone:

"You all appear to forget *me!*"

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth, when one of the heavy plates descended with a crash on the thick skull of M. Hippo; and M. Jejongle was instantly remembered. Indeed, he was more than remembered; for the giant, already irritated to the boiling point by Mlle. Lupa's insults, at this new affront, struck out savagely past her, and knocked the juggler head over heels under the table.

Mlle. Lupa, always quick-tempered, and especially so when her attention was focused on a juicy chicken bone, evidently considered her dinner companion's conduct far from decorous, and promptly inserted her sharp teeth in the offending hand that had administered the blow. M. Hippo, squealing from rage and pain like a wounded elephant, bounded to his feet, overturning the table.

Pandemonium followed. Every freak's hands, teeth, feet, were turned against the others. Above the shouts, screams, growls, and hisses of the combat, Papa Copo's voice could be heard bellowing for peace:

"Ah, my children, my children! This is no way to behave! Calm yourselves, I pray you! Mlle. Lupa, remember that you are a lady as well as a wolf!"

There is no doubt that M. Jacques Courbé would have suffered most in this undignified fracas, had it not been for St. Eustache, who had stationed himself over his tiny master, and who now drove off all would-be assailants.

As it was, Griffo, the unfortunate giraffe boy, was the most defenseless, and therefore became the victim. His small round head swayed back and forth to blows like a punching bag. He was bitten by Mlle. Lupa, buffeted by M. Hippo, kicked by M. Jejongle, clawed by Mme. Samson, and nearly strangled by both the baby boa constrictors, which had wound themselves about his neck like hangmen's nooses. Undoubtedly he would have fallen a victim to circumstances, and would never have left the banquet board alive, had it not been for Simon Lafleur, the bride, and half a dozen of her acrobatic friends, whom Papa Copo had implored to restore peace. Roaring with laughter, they sprang forward and tore the combatants apart.

M. Jacques Courbé was found sitting grimly under a fold of the tablecloth. He held a broken bottle of wine in one hand. The dwarf was very drunk, and in a towering rage. As Simon Lafleur approached with one of his silent laughs, M. Jacques Courbé hurled the bottle at his head.

"Ah, the little wasp!" the bareback rider cried, picking up the dwarf by his waistband. "Here is your fine husband, Jeanne! Take him away before he does me some mischief. *Parbleu,* he is a bloodthirsty fellow in his cups!"

The bride approached, her blond face crimson from wine and laughter. Now that she was safely married to a country estate, she took no more pains to conceal her true feelings.

"Oh, *la, la!*" she cried, seizing the struggling dwarf and holding him forcibly on her shoulder. "What a temper the little ape has! Well, we shall spank it out of him before long!"

"Let me down!" M. Jacques Courbé screamed in a paroxysm of fury. "You will regret this, *madame!* Let me down, I say!"

But the stalwart bride shook her head.

"No, no, my little one," she laughed. "You cannot escape your wife so easily! What, you would fly from my arms before the honeymoon!"

"Let me down!" he cried again. "Can't you see that they are laughing at me?"

"And why should they not laugh, my little ape? Let them laugh, if they will;

but I will not put you down. No, I will carry you thus, perched on my shoulder, to the farm. It will set a precedent which brides of the future may find a certain difficulty in following!"

"But the farm is quite a distance from here, my Jeanne," said Simon Lafleur. "You are as strong as an ox, and he is only a marmoset. Still I will wager a bottle of Burgundy that you set him down by the roadside."

"Done, Simon!" the bride cried, with a flash of her strong white teeth. "You shall lose your wager, for I swear that I could carry my little ape from one end of France to the other!"

M. Jacques Courbé no longer struggled. He now sat bolt upright on his bride's broad shoulder. From the flaming peaks of blind passion he had fallen into an abyss of cold fury. His love was dead, but some quite alien emotion was rearing an evil head from its ashes.

"So, *madame,* you could carry me from one end of France to the other!" he droned in a monotonous undertone. "From one end of France to the other! I will remember that always, *madame!*"

"Come!" cried the bride suddenly. "I am off. Do you and the others, Simon, follow to see me win my wager."

They all trooped out of the tent. A full moon rode the heavens and showed the road, lying as white and straight through the meadows as the part in Simon Lafleur's black, oily hair.

The bride, still holding the diminutive bridegroom on her shoulder, burst out in a song as she strode forward. The wedding guests followed them. Some walked none too steadily. Griffo, the giraffe boy, staggered pitifully on his long, thin legs. Papa Copo alone remained behind.

"What a strange world!" he muttered, standing in the tent door and following them with his round blue eyes. "Ah, these children of mine are difficult at times—very difficult!"

IV

A YEAR had rolled by since the marriage of Mlle. Jeanne Marie and M. Jacques Courbé. Copo's Circus had once more taken up its quarters in the town of Roubaix. For more than a week the country people for miles around had flocked to the side show to get a peep at Griffo, the giraffe boy; M. Hercule Hippo, the giant; Mlle. Lupa, the wolf lady; Mme. Samson, with her baby boa constrictors; and M. Jejongle, the famous juggler. Each was still firmly convinced that he or she alone was responsible for the popularity of the circus.

Simon Lafleur sat in his lodgings at the Sign of the Wild Boar. He wore nothing but red tights. His powerful torso, stripped to the waist, glistened with oil. He was kneading his biceps tenderly with some strong-smelling fluid.

Suddenly there came a sound of heavy, laborious footsteps on the stairs, and Simon Lafleur looked up. His rather gloomy expression lifted, giving place to the brilliant smile which had won for him the hearts of so many lady acrobats.

"Ah, this is Marcelle!" he told himself. "Or perhaps it is Rose, the English girl; or yet again little Francesca, although she walks more lightly. Well, no matter—whoever it is, I will welcome her!"

By now the lagging, heavy footfalls were in the hall, and a moment later they came to a halt outside the door. There was a timid knock.

Simon Lafleur's brilliant smile broadened.

"Perhaps some new admirer who needs encouragement," he told himself; but aloud he said: "Enter, *mademoiselle!*"

The door swung slowly open, and revealed the visitor. She was a tall, gaunt woman dressed like a peasant. The wind had blown her hair into her eyes. Now she raised a large, toil-worn hand, brushed it back across her forehead, and looked long and attentively at the bareback rider.

"You do not remember me?" she said at length.

Two lines of perplexity appeared above Simon Lafleur's Roman nose, and he slowly shook his head. He, who had known so many women in his time, was now at a loss. Was it a fair question to ask a man who was no longer a boy, and who had lived? Women change so in a brief time! Now this bag of bones, which seemed to be held together by the rags she wore, might at one time have appeared desirable to him. *Parbleu!* Fate was a conjurer! She waved her wand, and beautiful women were transformed into hags, jewels into pebbles, silks and laces into hempen cords. The brave fellow who danced to-night at the prince's ball might to-morrow dance more lightly on the gallows tree. The thing was to live and die with a full belly. To digest all that one could—that was life!

"You do not remember me?" she said again.

Simon Lafleur once more shook his sleek, black head.

"I have a poor memory for faces, *madame*," he said politely. "It is my misfortune, when there are such beautiful faces."

"Ah, but you should have remembered, Simon!" the woman cried, a sob rising up in her throat. "We were very close together, you and I. Do you not remember Jeanne Marie?"

"Jeanne Marie!" the bareback rider cried. "Jeanne Marie, who married a marmoset and a country estate? Don't tell me, *madame*, that you—"

He broke off and stared at her, open-mouthed. His sharp black eyes wandered from the wisps of wet, straggling hair down her gaunt person till they rested at last on her thick cowhide boots incrusted with layer on layer of mud and dust from the countryside.

"It is impossible!" he said at last.

"It is indeed Jeanne Marie," the woman answered, "or what is left of her. Ah, Simon, what a life he has led me! I have been merely a beast of burden! There are no ignominies which he has not made me suffer!"

"To whom do you refer?" Simon Lafleur demanded. "Surely you cannot mean that pocket edition husband of yours—that dwarf, Jacques Courbé?"

"Ah, but I do, Simon. Alas, he has broken me!"

"He—that toothpick of a man?" the bareback rider cried, with one of his silent laughs. "Why, it is impossible! As you once said yourself, Jeanne, you could crack his skull between finger and thumb like a hickory nut!"

"So I thought once. Ah, but I did not know him then, Simon! Because he was small, I thought I could do with him as I liked. It seemed to me that I was marrying a manikin. 'I will play Punch and Judy with this little fellow,' I said to myself. Simon, you may imagine my surprise when he began playing Punch and Judy with me!"

"But I do not understand, Jeanne. Surely at any time you could have slapped him into obedience!"

"Perhaps," she assented wearily, "had it not been for St. Eustache. From the first that wolf dog of his hated me. If I so much as answered his master back, he would show his teeth. Once, at the beginning, when I raised my hand to cuff Jacques Courbé, he sprang at my throat, and would have torn me limb from limb, had not the dwarf called him off. I was a strong woman, but even then I was no match for a wolf!"

"There was poison, was there not?" Simon Lafleur suggested.

"Ah, yes, I, too, thought of poison, but it was of no avail. St. Eustache would eat nothing that I gave him, and the dwarf forced me to taste first of all food that was placed before him and his dog. Unless I myself wished to die, there was no way of poisoning either of them."

"My poor girl!" the bareback rider said pityingly. "I begin to understand; but sit down and tell me everything. This is a revelation to me, after seeing you stalking homeward so triumphantly with your bridegroom on your shoulder. You must begin at the beginning."

"It was just because I carried him thus on my shoulder that I have had to suffer so cruelly," she said, seating herself on the only other chair the room afforded. "He has never forgiven me the insult which he says I put upon him. Do you remember how I boasted that I could carry him from one end of France to the other?"

"I remember. Well, Jeanne?"

"Well, Simon, the little demon has figured out the exact distance in leagues. Each morning, rain or shine, we sally out of the house—he on my back, the wolf dog at my heels—and I tramp along the dusty roads till my knees tremble underneath me from fatigue. If I so much as slacken my pace, if I falter, he goads me with his cruel little golden spurs, while at the same time St. Eustache nips my ankles. When we return home, he strikes so many leagues off a score which he says is the number of leagues from one end of France to the other. Not half that distance has been covered, and I am no longer a strong woman, Simon. Look at these shoes!"

She held up one of her feet for his inspection. The sole of the cowhide boot which incased it had been worn through, and Simon Lafleur caught a glimpse of bruised flesh caked with the mire of the highway.

"This is the third pair that I have had," she continued hoarsely. "Now he tells me that the price of shoe leather is too high, and that I shall have to finish my pilgrimage barefooted."

"But why do you put up with all this, Jeanne?" Simon Lafleur asked angrily. "You who have a carriage and a servant should not walk at all!"

"At first there was a carriage and a servant," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand; "but they did not last a week. He sent the servant about his business and sold the carriage at a near-by fair. Now there is no one but me to wait on him and his dog."

"But the neighbors?" Lafleur persisted. "Surely you could appeal to them?"

"We have no near neighbors, for the farm is quite isolated. I would have run away many months ago, if I could have escaped unnoticed; but they keep a continual watch on me. Once I tried, but I hadn't traveled more than a league before the wolf dog was snapping at my ankles. He drove me back to the farm, and the following day I was compelled to carry the little fiend till I fell from sheer exhaustion."

"But to-night you got away?"

"Yes," she said, with a quick, frightened glance at the door. "To-night I slipped out while they were both sleeping, and came here to you. I knew that you would protect me, Simon, because of what we have been to each other. Get Papa Copo to take me back in the circus, and I will work my fingers to the bone. Save me, Simon!"

Jeanne Marie could no longer suppress her sobs. They rose in her throat, choking her, making her incapable of further speech.

"Calm yourself, Jeanne," Simon Lafleur said soothingly. "I will do what I can for you. I shall have a talk with Papa Copo to-morrow. Of course, you are no longer the same woman that you were a year ago. You have aged since then; but perhaps our good Papa Copo could find you something to do."

He broke off and eyed her intently. She had stiffened in the chair, and her face, even under its coat of grime, had gone a sickly white.

"What troubles you, Jeanne?" he asked a trifle breathlessly.

"Hush!" she said, with a finger to her lips. "Listen!"

V

SIMON LAFLEUR could hear nothing but the tapping of the rain on the roof and the sighing of the wind through the trees. An unusual silence seemed to pervade the Sign of the Wild Boar.

"Now don't you hear it?" she cried with an inarticulate gasp. "Simon, it is in the house—it is on the stairs!"

At last the bareback rider's less sensitive ears caught the sound his companion had heard a full minute before. It was a steady *pit-pat, pit-pat,* on the stairs, hard to dissociate from the drip of the rain from the eaves; but each instant it came nearer and grew more distinct.

"Oh, save me, Simon, save me!" Jeanne Marie cried, throwing herself at his feet and clasping him about the knees. "Save me! It is St. Eustache!"

"Nonsense, woman!" the bareback rider said angrily, but nevertheless he rose. "There are other dogs in the world. On the second landing there is a blind fellow who owns a dog. Perhaps it is he you hear."

"No, no—I know St. Eustache's step! My God, if you had lived with him a year, you would know it, too! Close the door and lock it!"

"That I will not," Simon Lafleur said contemptuously. "Do you think I am frightened so easily? If it is the wolf dog, so much the worse for him. It will not be the first cur that I have choked to death with these two hands!"

Pit-pat, pit-pat—it was on the second landing. *Pit-pat, pit-pat*—now it was in the corridor, and coming fast. *Pit-pat, pit-pat*—all at once it stopped.

There was a moment's breathless silence, and then into the room trotted St. Eustache. M. Jacques Courbé sat astride the dog's broad back, as he had so often done in the circus ring. He held a tiny drawn sword, and his shoe button eyes seemed to reflect its steely glitter.

Simon Lafleur made an involuntary step backward. He had been prepared for St. Eustache, but not for the wolf dog's master.

The dwarf brought the dog to a halt in the middle of the room, and took in at a single glance the prostrate figure of Jeanne Marie. St. Eustache, too, seemed to take silent note of it. The stiff hair on his back rose up, he showed his long white fangs hungrily, and his eyes glowed like two live coals.

"So I find you *thus, madame!*" M. Jacques Courbé said at last. "It is fortunate that I have a charger here"—he patted St. Eustache on the dog's shaggy neck—" who can scent out my enemies as well as hunt them down in the open. Without him, I might have had some difficulty in discovering you. Well, the little game is up. I find you with your lover!"

"Simon Lafleur is not my lover!" she sobbed. "I have not seen him once since I married you until to-night! I swear it!"

"Once is enough," the dwarf said grimly. "The impudent stable boy must be chastised!"

"Oh, spare him!" Jeanne Marie implored. "Do not harm him, I beg of you! It is not his fault that I came! I—"

But at this point Simon Lafleur drowned her out in a roar of laughter.

"Ho, ho!" he roared, putting his hands on his hips. "You would chastise me, eh? *Nom d'un chien!* Don't try your circus tricks on *me!* Why, hop-o'-my-thumb, you who ride on a dog's back like a flea, out of this room before I squash you! Begone, melt, fade away!" He paused, expanded his barrel-like chest, puffed out his cheeks, and blew a great breath at the dwarf. "Blow away, insect," he bellowed, "lest I put my heel on you!"

M. Jacques Courbé was unmoved by this torrent of abuse. He sat very upright on St. Eustache's back, his tiny sword resting on his tiny shoulder.

"Are you done?" he said at last, when the bareback rider had run dry of invectives. "Very well, *monsieur!* Prepare to receive cavalry!" He paused for an instant, then added in a high, clear voice: "Get him, St. Eustache!"

The dog crouched, and at almost the same moment sprang at Simon Lafleur. The bareback rider had no time to avoid him and his tiny rider. Almost instantaneously the three of them had come to death grips.

Never in the history of warfare was there a stranger combat than this at the Sign of the Wild Boar. Legend has it that the knights of King Arthur's Round Table rode out to do battle with giants; but surely never one rode such a valiant steed as St. Eustache. Here was a charger who bit and tore, and whose cruel white fangs were soon turned to crimson. It was a gory business.

Simon Lafleur, strong man as he was, was bowled over by the wolf dog's unexpected leap. St. Eustache's clashing jaws closed on his right arm and crushed it to the bone. A moment later the dwarf, still clinging to his dog's back, thrust the point of his tiny sword into the body of the prostrate bareback rider.

Simon Lafleur struggled valiantly, but all to no purpose. Now he felt the fetid breath of the dog fanning his neck, and the wasp-like sting of the dwarf's blade, which this time found a mortal spot. A convulsive tremor shook him and he rolled over on his back. The circus *Romeo* was dead.

M. Jacques Courbé cleansed his sword on a kerchief of lace, dismounted, and approached Jeanne Marie. She was still crouching on the floor, her eyes closed, her head held tightly between both hands. The dwarf touched her imperiously on the broad shoulder which had so often carried him.

"*Madame,*" he said, "we now can return home. You must be more careful hereafter. *Ma foi,* it is an ungentlemanly business cutting the throats of stable boys!"

She rose to her feet, like a large trained animal at the word of command.

"You wish to be carried?" she said between livid lips.

"Ah, that is true, *madame,*" he murmured. "I was forgetting our little wager. From one end of France to the other, eh? Ah, yes! Well, you are to be congratulated, *madame*—you have covered nearly half the distance."

"Nearly half the distance," she repeated in a lifeless voice.

"Yes, *madame,*" M. Jacques Courbé continued. "I fancy that you will be quite a docile wife by the time you have done." He paused, and then added reflectively: "It is truly remarkable how speedily one can ride the devil out of a woman—with spurs!"

Papa Copo had been spending a convivial evening at the Sign of the Wild Boar. As he stepped out into the street, he saw three familiar figures preceding him—a tall woman, a tiny man, and a large dog with upstanding ears. The woman carried the man on her shoulder; the dog trotted at her heels.

The circus owner came to a halt and stared after them. His round eyes were full of childish astonishment.

"Can it be?" he murmured. "Yes, it is! Three old friends! And so Jeanne Marie still carries him! Ah, but she should not poke fun at M. Jacques Courbé. He is so sensitive; but, alas, they are the kind that are always henpecked!"

Homeward Bound

HOW DAN GODWIN, ABOUT TO SAIL FOR ENGLAND, FELL IN WITH A THIEF IN BEIRA

By Perceval Gibbon

THE veranda on which they sat fronted toward the east, so that the great sullen sunset was behind them; but from the wide waters of the Bay of Beira, still and level as a floor, the glow of it rose like a vapor, lighting the square jaw and lean profile of Dan Godwin, sprawling in his chair, and that harbor of dreams which was the face of Incarnacion, his wife.

They sat thus upon the very edge of Africa, their backs turned upon it, upon its promises and its betrayals. The evening mood, the peace of the brief twilight hour of the tropics, held them both. They were together in a companionship of silence, while about them the little hectic town, parched upon its burning sand spit, woke slowly after its day-long oppression of burning heat.

The first breath of the night breeze wavered landward and touched them with its chill. Dan stirred in his chair.

"Yes," he said slowly. "To-night an' to-morrow an' to-morrow night, and then we'll have seen the last of all this. About a month from now, an' we'll be sittin' by a fireside. Sorry to leave it, Carnation?"

Incarnacion was sitting forward in her chair, her elbows on her knees, her chin propped in her hands. She turned her head and smiled up at him. She had a manner of flashing in an instant out of one mood and into another.

"Sorry!" she repeated. "No, *not* sorry. Me—I don' care a dam'. I am 'fraid only something shall stop us an' make us stay 'ere; an' then I want to lie down an' die!"

She was a small girl, ripe with the early maturity of the tropics, black-haired, great-eyed, and vivid as a passion flower in all her coloring and effect. Beside Dan's rather serious and workaday quality, she was as incongruous as a bird of paradise in a poultry yard. Something of this had penetrated to his imagination. He was apt to dwell in talk upon the great changes before her when the awaited steamer should have completed her transplantation.

"Nothing's going to stop us," he assured her. "You'll be eating Christmas pudding before you know where you are. You're an Englishwoman now, my pretty!"

She did not answer at once, but sat looking at him in silence.

"An' it's goin' to be a change for you like bein' born again," he wandered on.

He went on to speak for the hundred and first time of the home among the cherry orchards of kindly Kent which he had left twelve years before to seek the fortune he had found in cruel Africa. He spoke of his mother as he remembered her—"good as gold she is, Carnation, an' respected for miles around"; of the George Inn in the village, of baking potatoes in the fires of the hop kilns.

She heard him until he had talked himself out, then nodded.

"Yes," she agreed, in the deep tones to which her voice could descend under certain stresses. "I die here—me, Incarnacion Isabella Inez da Gruz—and I am born again there! Dan, you 'member Tete? You 'member it all?"

He looked at her, vaguely conscious of the quality of her voice.

"'Tisn't so likely I'd ever forget it, Carnation," he answered seriously. He reached out a shirt-sleeved arm and laid a hand upon her shoulder. "Seein' I found you there, 'tisn't so likely, is it?"

She leaned toward him. The rosy glow upon the water was dulling to bronze; the night was striding up apace. In some house near by a gramophone was aping a mandolin. She lifted her face close to his, as if on purpose to show him its sudden burning earnestness.

"What you 'member 'bout Tete, Dan?" she demanded. "*You* 'member just old tired, worn-out town on Zambezi where you come for buy stores. *You* 'member stink an' niggers an' fever—an' Incarnacion in dirty old *camisa* an' *guardapa* an' cigarette an' no shoes sittin' all day in shadow by a wall! An' *you* 'member, too, Incarnacion's fat papa what wake up, spit, an' go 'sleep again, an' Incarnacion's baby brother what roll about naked with nigger babies! Yes, I 'member all that, too; but me—I don' care a dam'! Those things all right; but, Dan—"

Dan waited for her to go on.

"But what, old girl?"

"Ah!" she sighed, gathered herself to tensity once more, and resumed.

"Me—I sit under wall in shadow, smoking cigarette an' looking out at street. An' by 'm' by, Kafirs go past, carrying load, and after them come big white man, with gun under his arm. Englishman, American—all kinds of white man, all dressed the same, with hat low over his eyes. He see me sittin' under my wall, and he smile, he kiss his hand, he call out: ''Ullo, Polly!' an' he wink an' go on. An' nex' one the same—all jus' the same, 'cept sometimes they say worse things. *You* don' 'member all that, Dan!"

Dan Godwin frowned. He lifted his closed left fist, looked at it thoughtfully, and let it fall.

"Seems to me I remember *one* of those fellers," he said slowly.

She leaned suddenly into the ready clasp of his arm.

"Ah, Dan, but you mus' un'erstand! Never no more they look at me like that an' laugh an' say those things. Not because you punch them; not because I got shoes an' hat, an' don't sit under a wall. No—it is because you make me into Englishwoman. Dan, I am proud like hell! Dan, I like to kiss your feet! Dan, I—"

"I got a face up here, instead!" interrupted Dan, and crushed her words from her lips with his own.

"So," said Incarnacion, when the interlude was over, "you see, Dan, why I'm 'fraid if something shall stop us."

"Nothing 'll stop us," asserted Dan cheerfully. "You're safe with me, Carnation. To-morrow I'll buy our passages; next day we'll go on board; a month from then you'll be sleepin' in the bed that I was born in; an' that's all about it!"

He lifted her and set her on her feet, and rose himself.

"You go down to Mulligan's, Dan?" she asked.

"Well," he hesitated, "I did think of droppin' in for an hour before supper; but if you'd rather I'd stay here—"

"No, no!" she protested. "You go, Dan, an' have a drink. I don' want you stop here all the time like sick man or old woman. I fetch your coat."

He gave in, of course, as a man does in such a matter, with a show of reluctant surrender. She flashed her entirely comprehending smile at him, and flitted to the doorway.

"I say!" he called after her. She halted and turned to him upon the threshold. "You might get my pocketbook, too. It's in your trunk. I haven't got a cent here."

There was a second's pause ere his wife replied.

"Dan!" she said then, in those deep tones she had used before. "You don't want that money for play cards!"

Dan laughed. There had been an incident at Salisbury, on their way down to the Coast, when he had lost in an evening a sum that had staggered Incarnacion. She had seen actual money only half a dozen times or so in her life. It was a holy and terrible thing for her; and she had been frightened when Dan blasphemed it by pushing it in masses—pounds at a time, fifteen pounds in an evening—across a table to his adversary.

"No," he said. "I'm not goin' to gamble with our fares home, Carnation. I'm not goin' to play at all. Is that all right?"

She nodded and disappeared within.

Dan crossed to the rail of the veranda and leaned upon it, still smiling. A complete well-being is the nearest that most men come to happiness; but in Incarnacion, her ignorance and her wisdom, her passion and her calm good fellowship, he touched at moments the skirts of ecstasy.

In all things he esteemed himself well rewarded for the twelve years of his labor in Africa, as trooper in the Mounted Police, learning the land, as trader, as gold buyer, and last as the holder of a concession under the terrible Chief M'kombi. He had sold his holdings well. Eleven thousand pounds had gone home from the bank in Salisbury; the pocketbook contained two hundred and odd pounds for the journey; and he and Incarnacion were done with Africa forever.

"I'll take her to a theater," he chuckled. "She'll think it's witchcraft!"

Incarnacion returned with the jacket, and held it up while he put it on. She gave him the big pocketbook of worn leather.

"I am glad you don't go to play no more, Dan," she said.

"No more!" he agreed. "Back for supper, old girl!"

II

He kissed Incarnacion and strode off. At the corner he looked back, and she waved to him ere he passed around it.

Then the lime-washed walls of Beira were around him—those houses whose little windows are like loopholes for spies, standing upon streets deep in loose sand, where men tread as noiselessly as ghosts. He met few folk, and none that he knew. At this hour the men were in the bars or other accepted resorts. He seemed for the moment to have the town to himself. He plodded through the foot-clogging sand in a solitude of which he hastened to be rid.

And suddenly, startlingly, he was alone no longer. A hand fell heavily, as in an open-handed blow, on his shoulder, clawed for and grasped a hold upon the stuff of his jacket, and wrenched him back. Hideously startled—he had heard no footfall, no breath—he nevertheless whirled around to fight whatever had to be fought.

He had an instant in which to be aware of a figure in white, white from neck to feet, with a white right arm lifted and already swinging down upon him. He had no time to grapple ere the blow fell. Something crashed blindingly upon his skull over his left ear, and he was down, twitching and nuzzling his face in the sand.

The blackness of utter unconsciousness rolled down upon him, touched him, and receded. Though he could neither move nor cry out, he knew, as through a red fog of pain and sickness, that hands pulled him over on his back, explored him, and rifled him. Then he was alone once more, with pain playing upon him ever and ever more intolerably as his consciousness became clearer and the stunned nerves began to register again.

The word "sandbag" came to his lips, but it was some time before he could say it. It was an hour before he could raise himself to a sitting posture. During that time three people passed, glanced cautiously at what might have been a dead body lying on the sand, and departed forthwith upon their own affairs. Such was the quality of Beira.

At length he was dizzily upright against the wall and able to take stock of himself. He could find no blood, and the bone of his skull was intact. The clever thug's device, whatever it was, had done its work perfectly, leaving neither a murdered nor a visibly wounded man to be a testimony against it.

The pocketbook, of course, was gone, with its contents. He had not been carrying anything else worth a thief's attention.

At last he was able to move. His head was a box of aches that rolled about inside it, and there was a painful stiffness in his neck. Cautiously, mistrustful of his balance, he moved out from the wall to where he had lain in the sand.

"Couldn't ha' dropped anywhere, o' course!" he was murmuring.

He had matches in his pocket, but he could not yet trust himself to stoop without falling. On all fours, then, he lit his matches and stared about, but there was no sign of what he sought.

"Here's where he caught hold o' me," he said, over a patch of trampled sand. "Come up behind me wearin'—yes, wearin' rubber soles—"

He broke off, staring. The match stung his fingers and went out.

"Was there two of them, then?" he wondered, as he fumbled for another.

Dan Godwin was not a hunter, or in any sense a tracker; but he had shot big game upon occasion, like every other man of those parts, and had followed it up by its spoor. What the first match had revealed the second confirmed. There were the prints of a ribbed rubber sole, such as one finds on a canvas sport shoe, both coming to the spot and departing from it; and where the brief struggle had taken place, it had stamped itself deep. Mingling with the marks of it, keeping pace with it, seconding it on the scene of the attack, and accompanying it on the retreat, was another—a plain flat sole with no heel.

Match after match burned and fell, while he crawled on hands and knees upon the trail of those swift feet to where, forty yards back, they lost themselves amid a confusion of other tracks. And it was only then that the truth burst upon him. He forgot the ache in his head and his wrenched neck, and stood upright.

"Got it!" he exclaimed aloud. "White canvas shoes, with rubber soles, a right one and a left one—an' the right one was ribbed. It was one feller, an' he was wearin' odd shoes!"

He stood meditating for a time. Then, with a small measure of his former briskness, he turned and walked away in his original direction.

III

It was twenty minutes later that Dan Godwin appeared in the doorway of Mulligan's saloon, and stood upon the threshold, blinking at the light within. It was a long, narrow, low-ceilinged room, with a bar dividing it in halves and a few small tables at one end.

The illustrious Mulligan himself, white-jacketed, cropped like a convict, jowled like a Cæsar, saw the visitor first, nodded a welcome, and slid a bottle along the bar. A tall man who had been leaning on the counter, talking to the proprietor, turned his head and revealed the face of an acquaintance of Dan's.

"Hullo, Dan!" he greeted. As Dan came forward, he frowned in quick scrutiny. "Not sick, are you?"

"A bit," replied Dan, and filled his glass.

A doctor would probably hesitate to prescribe neat whisky in half-tumbler doses for such a case; but doctors are not often hit on the head. The strong spirit seemed to Dan to move through him, relighting lamps of life in his flagging body and brain. He put down his glass.

"Another drink!" he commanded, and added, as an afterthought: "I got no money, Mulligan."

"I have," replied Mulligan calmly. "Want some?"

That, too, was in the quality of Beira.

The tall man by Dan's side had been watching him intently. Dan turned to him, his glass in his hand.

"It's all right, Fynn," he said. "I'll tell you about it in a minute."

He finished his second glass at leisure. He could see in a mirror behind the bar the reflection of himself from the waist up, his torn collar, and the strange pallor that showed through the tan on his face.

"Well?" said Fynn at last.

Dan set down his glass.

"This town o' yours," he said deliberately, "isn't safe for a white man. I've been sandbagged on the street to-night and cleaned out of more than two hundred quid—the passage money home for me and my wife. An' the boat goes day after tomorrow!"

His voice was mounting in a crescendo of fury. At his mention of Incarnacion, the thought of her stung him like vitriol. Two quiet men at a table at the other end of the room lifted their heads to hear what was going forward.

"Hist!" warned Mulligan and Fynn together. "Not so loud, man! You don't want the police to hear of it?"

He gaped at them.

"Don't want the police—" he began.

Their faces were urgent and serious. In Beira he was a stranger in a strange land, and they were men of the place. He paused.

"Don't ye see," said Mulligan, "if these dago police was to trace the man—an' they might, at that—they'd get the money out of him, if they had to roast him alive for it. An' what better would you be? You'd never see a cent of it. Go on an' tell us how it was—quietly, now!"

They got it from him finally, their three heads close together above the bottles on the bar—the whole story of the evening, from the time he had left the house until his arrival at Mulligan's. His two hearers thought little enough of the clew of the odd shoes.

"There's hundreds o' fellers in Beira wears white clo'es an' rubber-soled shoes," declared Fynn. "If you'd noticed his face, now—but you can't go round making people lift their feet for you. They wouldn't do it."

"An' let's see that wallop on yer head," suggested Mulligan. "Shift yer hat a minute, Dan."

He inspected the injury in a manner that suggested experience in such matters.

"Yes," he said, "I'll bet that hurts! 'Twas a bender he clubbed ye with, not a sandbag. It's a bit o' rubber piping, ye know, closed up at the ends an' half full o' shot. Ye can chloroform a man with it, same as was done to you, or crack his egg for him, easy as kiss yer hand. That's what it was. Have another drink with me, Dan!"

Dan nodded absently. Then he frowned in resolution.

"Fynn," he said suddenly, "you know this town, don't you? Well, there's one thing I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' through it an' around about it to-morrow, lookin' for footprints like them I told you about. Now, s'pose you come with me and show me around. It would save time, an' it's a chance. What say?"

Fynn pursed his lips.

"It isn't one chance in a million," he demurred. "An' it's blazin' hot in the sun, you know; but I'll come, o' course."

They talked it over yet awhile, and it needed all Dan's stubbornness of spirit to resist the discouragement to which their views of the matter invited him. The two hundred pounds was gone beyond recall, they considered. The one thing left to do was to prevent the hated Portuguese police from profiting by it.

Dan told Incarnacion that he had had a fall and bumped his head. Of his loss he said nothing. There would be time enough yet to dash the cup of her desire from her lips when all his efforts had failed.

"An' to-morrow is last day!" she said, with a touch of her own excited glee, while they sat at supper. "You take me with you when you go to buy the passages, Dan?"

They were facing each other across their belated supper. He raised his sore and heavy head and looked at her, glowing with smiles, vibrant with the assurance of near and certain bliss. This was the girl who had captured him, and a chill of real fear fell upon him as he thought how his news would strike her down. He steadied himself to answer.

"Yes, I will," he said. "I'll come back and fetch you before I go to the steamboat office."

And twice in the night, feigning slumber for a shield against her questions, he heard Incarnacion's little gurgling laugh of gladness unalloyed.

IV

In Fynn's view, the search that began next morning was an idiotic proceeding. It was a brilliant day of the Beira summer, and by eleven in the morning the sun was high and dangerous. The heat of the sand underfoot struck through their boots painfully. None was abroad who could remain under cover.

Fynn would have led the way to the neighborhood of the landing, where such as Dan's assailant might be expected to abide—a quarter of that poisonous squalor which is the character of the tropical slum; but at the Praça Dan must needs turn aside to follow a fat and snowily clad Portuguese major, until wide footprints exonerated him.

"Oh, hell!" cried Fynn disgustedly, as Dan returned to him. "We can't go on like this. I'm soppin' with sweat already. Let's get a drink before we get sunstroke!"

But Dan shook his head.

"It's luck I'm trustin' to, Fynn," he said. "I can't afford to miss any chances."

Upon the veranda of the hotel where they halted to quench their thirst, a number of men sprawled in chairs with their feet on the rail. Dan would not enter until he had walked along the row and inspected every sole.

Fynn would have abandoned the quest, through fatigue and disbelief in any possibility of success, were it not for something which he vaguely perceived in his companion. He could not have given it a name, but he could not fail to see it—Dan's manner of a man who whiles away a tedious interval till the ordained moment arrives, the mild and tolerant patience of one who is assured that the moment *will* arrive.

"Still trustin' to that luck?" he asked sourly, when, in the early afternoon, they reached the banks of a fetid creek, whose unfathomed black mud shone with an opalescence of putrefaction in the intolerable sunlight.

"It's all I got to trust to," answered Dan quietly. "You see, Fynn"—he broke into a confidence—"it's my wife. It 'll half kill her if she don't sail to-morrow. I'm bound to find that feller and that money, else I'd just have to go home an' tell her. You see, you ain't married. You can't understand."

"No," said Fynn. "I ain't married. I'd go back an' tell her, if I was you."

Dan laughed.

"Lord!" he said. "I can just see myself, when any minute—any minute, now—I might set eyes on those tracks. I'm goin' to, Fynn. I got a feelin' I'm goin' to!"

"Oh, hell!" groaned Fynn.

And then it happened. Out of the stillness of the blinding afternoon, walking noiselessly upon his rubber soles, there passed them a lean figure in dirty and flimsy white clothes, slouching toward a green brick hovel a couple of hundred yards off. Its head was roofed in by a wide hat of straw, from under the brim of which there glanced sidelong toward them a long face of a blank pallor.

The man did not speak or nod, as the fashion is in those parts, but moved on without pausing, turning toward them his narrow back and the droop of his starved shoulders.

" Skinner, his name is," said Fynn casually, looking after him with disgust. " An' a nice sample of a white man for—what's the matter with you now?"

Dan had interrupted his companion with a low, wordless cry. He stood as if petrified, with a hand outstretched, and a finger pointing to the ground in the wake of the passer-by.

Fynn's incredulous eyes followed the pointing finger. The man had printed himself all too plainly upon the sand. The very ground he cumbered cried aloud for vengeance upon him. Fynn gasped, and his eyes rose to Dan's face.

Still pointing downward, Dan was staring after the man in white. His lips writhed.

" Ribbed an' plain!" he was murmuring. " Ribbed an' plain!"

He started to move, but Fynn had him by the arm ere he could break into a pelting pursuit.

" It's all right, Dan," he urged. " You've got him. He's going to his shanty. Let him get inside; you can handle him better indoors!"

Dan struggled a moment in mere rage, then yielded. They stood where they were, watching the lean, drooping figure plodding from them to the refuge of a squalid dwelling where no refuge was. The man did not once look back. He came to his wretched house, thrust open the door, entered, and disappeared.

" He's got it on him," said Fynn, for some reason in a whisper. " You saw his door wasn't fastened?"

" Carnation sails to-morrow, then!" was Dan's answer, as they started toward the hovel.

V

NEITHER of the two men was armed, for the revolver is not a tool in common use in Africa; but the possibility that the tenant of the hut might have a weapon did not stay them when they reached the door. Dan thrust it wide, and strode in. Fynn followed, and closed it behind him.

So noiseless had been their approach, and so swift their entry, that they had time to see the occupant seated on the edge of the squalid bed, his head bowed in his hands. He looked up quickly. There was no recognition in his eyes as he stared at them.

" What in hell do you want here?" he demanded, with every outward seeming of indignation.

He might have been thirty years of age. He had the emaciation, the fleshless bristle of outstanding bones at knee and elbow and shoulder, with which malaria writes its record. It was hard to think of him as wielding a weapon; but in the paper-white face and in the set of the mouth there was something feral, the mark of the bandit and the enemy of mankind.

" Well!" he spoke up to Dan, who stood over him in a quiet that was more eloquent than any spoken menace. " Well! What is it?"

Dan answered in the tones that came to him unbidden.

" I'm come to get the pocketbook an' the money you robbed me of last night. Where are they?"

" Robbed you of last night!" The man on the bed laughed jarringly. " You're crazy! You been out in the sun—"

He ceased. Dan's ready hands shot out and took him by the throat, and he was flung backward on the bed, with an iron knee crushing into his chest and Dan's face close to his own. He strangled feebly in his assailant's grip, and his livid face contorted and suffused.

" Lie still!" said Dan, and let go of him. " I'm goin' to find that money!"

And forthwith, Fynn standing silent at the door, he peeled the shoddy white cotton garments from the man, ripping them from him in strips, tearing away the ill matched shoes, till the creature lay in his nakedness. A little Portuguese paper money of insignificant value was all he found.

" H-m!" he said. " Now look here, you! I'm goin' to find the money you robbed me of—you savvy? If I don't, you're goin' to tell me where it is. Come on, Fynn! He can't get away!"

Assuredly the wretch was in no condition to run. He lay on the floor, feeling his throat, while the two men searched the single room of the hovel. There was little enough to search in that place of unbeautiful poverty; yet at the beginning of the quest, Fynn, scattering the bed abroad, uttered a triumphant cry.

"Look at this, Dan!"

It was the bender that Mulligan had described—the two-foot piece of hose, closed at each end with a binding of wire, and loaded with shot. Fynn swished it through the air.

"Kill a bull with that!" he announced.

"We'll be wanting it, p'r'aps," said Dan. "Look at this!"

He had been stooping among the oddments he had overturned from a kerosene case—old boots, a broken alarm clock, a coverless book, and the like. He stood up and showed his find.

"My pocketbook, empty!"

"An' that proves it," cried Fynn.

"Proves it!" said Dan. "It didn't want provin'—I knew! An' now we've searched the place through; we ain't found nothing; so this young feller's goin' to tell us where he's stowed it away. Give me that thing you got, Fynn!"

Dan stooped over the wasted body, hoisted it to a sitting position on the edge of the dismantled bedstead, and stood back and looked at it. A nausea touched him at the situation. He frowned.

"Steamboat office closes at four," he said aloud.

The wretched man on the bed shuddered, his eyes fixed on the bender. He strove to speak, at first vainly, because of his crushed throat.

"Quick!" commanded Dan. "There's no getting out of it. Where's my two hundred and ten pounds?"

The thief's answer was a wailing cry that began inarticulately and wavered into speech.

"There was only twenty milreis!" were the first distinguishable words. "Only twenty milreis, so 'elp me!"

Dan and Fynn exchanged a look. The creature on the bed began to weep.

"Two hundred and ten pounds!" repeated Dan, and raised the bender.

"You didn't 'ave 'em!" screamed the other. "You didn't 'ave 'em! Only twenty milreis!"

He flung out impotent arms to ward off the blow. Dan hesitated, closed his eyes for an instant, then struck at the naked flank. The power of the blow, as its cargo of shot slipped to the striking end of the instrument, appalled him. He felt as if he had hewed at the man with an ax. The thief fell over sidewise, babbling and moaning feebly.

"Only twenty milreis! Oh, Gawd, only twenty milreis!"

The two men stared down at him.

"He's game, anyhow," said Fynn.

Dan shuddered.

"It's like beating a dying man," he said. "I can't do that again, Fynn!"

Fynn considered.

"No?" he said. "Still"—in a whisper—"he don't need to know that. You can threaten to kill him." And then he spoke the word that was the death warrant of the thief. "You was sayin' about your wife—you know!"

Dan turned away. His very being was torn asunder. In the presence of that pitiable being on the bed he even tried to put Incarnacion aside; but in the mere effort to obliterate her, he summoned her the more vividly to mind.

"Dan, I like to kiss your feet!"

He swung about and strode to the bed. The naked man shrank and quivered. Dan put a hand to the bare shoulder, and pressed it down. With the other he took a fresh grip of the bender.

"Now!" he said. "We'll make an end o' this. You tell me where that money is, an' I'll give you the odd ten pound. If you don't tell me right away now, so help me God, I'll kill you! Do you understand? Go on, now—where is that money? Tell me!"

Faint words came from beneath him. He bent to hear.

"Speak up," he said. "It's death if you don't!"

"Milreis," he heard. "Only twenty—"

He struck and rose. Fynn came forward, looked, and made sure.

"Well," he said, "he won't be missed. If I'd been in his place, I'd ha' told; an' now the money's lost for good."

Dan nodded.

"And it ain't the only thing that's lost. Damn him, I'm glad I killed him!"

"That's good," said Fynn. "Let's leave him here. Somebody'll find him an' dump him in the creek. Come on, Dan!"

VI

INCARNACION was not at home when Dan arrived. He took her absence as a respite, and sat down on the veranda to wait for her.

He had invented no form of words in

which to mask his failure from her. He had nothing ready but a firm resolution that she should never know the manner either of the loss or of the retribution. For the rest, he merely dreaded the telling of that which would half kill her.

He sat smoking and staring before him at the bay, in a mere inertness of misery, till her return surprised him.

" 'Ullo, Dan!"

She ran across to him and fluttered a kiss upon his face. He removed his pipe and looked up to her laughter and warm beauty, and she saw the bleakness of his countenance.

" There is something wrong, Dan?" she asked quickly. Then she laughed again, and sat down upon his knee. " I know—you are cross because you come an' I am not 'ere. But oh, Dan, I wait an' wait till I can't wait no more; so I go get them by myself. Look, Dan!"

She fumbled in her bosom, produced the things she sought, and gave them to him. He took them, looked, and all but cried out. Two broad vouchers for two second-class passages, Beira to London! He gaped at her.

" An' here, Dan, is the rest of the money. I don't know how much I shall pay, so I take it all with me. Where you got your pocketbook?"

She had drawn it out, and was stuffing the crackling bank notes into it, before he could ask:

" Where'd you get that money?"

She was a little puzzled.

" I get it out of here, Dan, when I fetch it for you last night. You don't 'member?"

He sat up so suddenly that she nearly fell from his knee.

" *You* took the money from my pocketbook, Carnation?"

" Dan, what is a matter? I tell you last night. 'You don' want that money for play cards?' I say; an' you say no. So I take it out an' put you twenty milreis for drinks. You been think that money been lost, Dan?"

She laughed and laid her arms about his neck. Dan he held her close, that she might not hear the voice that moaned over the barren sand from the green brick hovel by the creek:

" Only twenty milreis—only twenty—"

BASIL AND SWEET ROSEMARY

Basil and sweet rosemary
My belovèd is to me.

In her eyes I see the cool
Beauty of the mountain pool.

Twilight shadows in her hair
She forever seems to wear.

In her voice there is combined
Bird and brook and matin wind;

And there is in her caress
Such a soothing tenderness!

But if you should ask for some
Fond and dear compendium—

All compacted that she is,
Fragrant idealities—

I should say with certainty
Basil and sweet rosemary!

Clinton Scollard

Pepperpot

THE ADVENTURES OF THORNE FAIRFAX, LATE FIRST LIEUTENANT, UNITED STATES NAVY, ON A TROPIC ISLE OF ROMANCE

By Henry C. Rowland

Author of "The Sultana," "Pearl Island," etc.

THE story is told by Lieutenant Fairfax, now—for want of better employment—skipper of Harrison Grosvenor's yacht, the Integrity. Grosvenor, an American millionaire, is cruising in the West Indies for his health, with his daughter Carol, a girl of twenty. Calling at Fort de France, on the French island of Martinique, he sends Carol for a run ashore, with Fairfax for an escort. To the skipper's horror, the flighty girl drinks too much gin and vermuth at a roadside café. To make matters worse for him, while his charge is in a maudlin state they meet Jasmine Saint Cyr, a beautiful Martiniquaise for whom he has conceived a sudden and romantic admiration.

Fairfax gets Carol back to Fort de France, but while he leaves her for a moment in order to speak to Benton, the American vice consul, she disappears. When the skipper reports this to her father, Grosvenor is so terribly excited that he has an apoplectic seizure. Fairfax undertakes to search for the missing girl, and enlists the aid of the vice consul and of M. Lamonte, the *commissaire* of police. Before starting on his quest, he and Benton go to a hotel for dinner, and here, at a table in the dining room, they see Jasmine Saint Cyr and an older woman who is apparently her mother.

VI

WE took our seats at a table some distance away from the one at which Jasmine was sitting. Benton glanced across at me with a little smile.

"Looks like an alibi, doesn't it, old chap?" he said.

"It looks more like a good stab at an alibi," I muttered. "Bellevue isn't very far. There's been plenty of time to get there and back."

The vice consul leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"But I tell you, Fairfax, Mme. Saint Cyr and her daughter, as Lamonte, the *commissaire* says, are above all suspicion. Their family is one of the best and earliest colonial families on Martinique. It was wiped out, with practically all of its possessions, by the volcano. Shortly afterward Eulalie Saint Cyr went to distant relatives of the name in France."

"Whom did she marry?" I asked.

Benton frowned.

"I don't know. Some cousin, I suppose; or she may have taken their name when they adopted her. She came back here only a few months ago."

"With her daughter?" I asked.

"No—her daughter came back a couple of years ago with Mme. Dieudonné, but went to visit her on Guadeloupe. Mme. Dieudonné has been back to Paris since. By gorry"—his face lighted—"that must be the girl whose portrait you found in the book!"

"She is," I answered.

"Well, I never thought about her," said Benton; "but I remember now that she and *la belle Edmée* were here visiting at Señor de Gonza's house about eighteen months ago. The old boy's sister lives with him. There's no chance of their being mixed up in this business. They're all well known and respected people. No, I'm beginning to believe that this is some wild ransom job, after all." He struck the table softly with his fist. "I've got an idea!"

"Shoot!"

"Grosvenor fired his sailing master at San Juan for giving him cheek. The man might easily have learned from the wireless operator that they were coming here. The

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yacht was about a week at San Juan, and yesterday a little steamer came in from there. This disgruntled sailing master must have known of Grosvenor's state of health, and of his devotion to his daughter, and he had the double motive of revenge and easy money. I shall find out to-morrow who has landed."

"And I shall find out to-night," I said, "whether or not this Mme. Saint Cyr's villa is being guarded. You'll have to excuse me, Benton, but I think your theory is punk."

"Well, darn it all," he protested, "then yours is bunk! We all know about Mme. Saint Cyr. She nursed at the front from beginning to end of the war, and she has all sorts of decorations and things. She has a temper, too, and she has a pretty daughter. If she caught anybody prowling about her premises, she'd probably put a bullet through him first and ask his errand afterward!"

"All the same, I'm going to look them over," I said.

I stepped out into the office, where I wrote a line to Bosmiess, telling him to have his car outside the hotel as soon as possible. This I gave to the chasseur, with a five-franc note, and sped him on his way. As I reëntered the dining room, Jasmine glanced at me without the slightest sign of recognition; but I got a curious covert look from the dark eyes of Mme. Saint Cyr.

Benton shook his head as I sat down.

"'Fraid you're letting yourself in for a pretty bad show, Fairfax!"

"A hunch is a hunch," I answered. "I've got it, and strong."

He raised his eyebrows.

"I think I'd leave it to Lamonte. That old bird knows this island and her people as you know your compass. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because a man is black or brown, he must be unintelligent. Across the street in the Palais de Justice you'll see white French lawyers pleading a case before a presiding judge as black as Menelek; and let me tell you they never slip anything over on that old jurist!"

"Don't doubt it," I answered. "All the same, I'm going to try to find out a little more about these rich and pretty and distinguished people. The chief of police stands too much in awe of them for my taste."

"As you like," said Benton, and made no further opposition.

I noticed that his eyes—fine hazel ones—were straying pretty often toward the other table, where Jasmine sat facing him. I guessed that he was rapidly absorbing her uncommon beauty, and getting a reaction from it. Possibly she was getting something, too, for he was a handsome chap, and had a singularly winning smile. I had christened him "the faun," and our three pals on the same floor "*les trois mousticaires,*" because the hour of siesta found each of them dozing under his mosquito net.

The good dinner was wasted on me. I could no more than taste the *avocats* and onion soup and *langouste* and *tournedos.* Somewhere out there in the heavy-scented murk was the willful little girl whose father had confided her to my guardianship. I was tormenting myself in speculation as to what sort of treatment had been accorded her.

By this time I was convinced that she had been lured away to pay off some old grudge against her father—some score that he had perhaps come down there to settle. The hand of vengeance had fallen before he had had time to do this, and now the odds were about even on his living to manage it at all. What, I wondered frantically, might happen to Carol if her father were never to regain his conscious thought or speech or action?

Benton seemed to read my mind.

"If only he's able to talk or write within the next few hours, I'll bet we shall learn something."

I nodded.

"It's a safe bet. When I told him what had happened, he was horrified, but not surprised. He looked more as if some blow that he feared had fallen. If there had been nothing to dread, he wouldn't have been hit so hard, especially as Carol had broken him to the modern young American girl's habit of going and coming when and where and with whom she saw fit. I told him that it was a lady she went with before he keeled over."

"That information seemed to be just what knocked him out," said Benton thoughtfully. His eyes flitted back to Jasmine Saint Cyr. "But it's idiotic to think that that lovely girl could have had anything to do with it."

"Well, she might have been lying dead or dying in the car, for all that lovely girl appeared to care," I retorted. "The look on her face as she turned away is about all I'm going on; but it's enough."

He shook his head.

"Lamonte wouldn't like it."

"Lamonte can go to hell," I said with warmth. "I'm not stuck on his way of chucking a possible clew into the discard because the people involved are rich and aristocratic."

"Perhaps he hasn't chucked it," Benton suggested.

"Then he should have said so. I'm rather used to having my suggestions treated with some slight consideration."

"All right!" said Benton. "Only mind your step, Fairfax. That Señor de Gonza looks snaggish. South Americans, and especially Venezuelans, are devilish quick on the trigger."

"So are some North Americans," I answered; "but if you'd like it better, I'll leave my gun in my trunk."

He looked relieved.

"That might save us all a lot of trouble. There's no blooming chance of your needing it, and in your present state of nerves it's apt to go off and hit somebody." He looked at me with his flashing smile. "I know how darned hard it is for you to sit around doing nothing, Fairfax. Go to it, if you like; but go slow—the way we walked behind our barrage. There's no crime to speak of on Martinique, except the occasional *crime passionelle*, where some Johnny falls foul of another Johnny with his girl. I don't believe there's any record of a case of kidnaping in the police archives of the island."

"There is now," I snapped. "All right, I'll leave the gun at home."

"That's best. You're naturally all keyed up, and I might not be able to get much backing in an international complication at this moment, when the disarmament conference is chewing the rag. If by any chance you should discover something, beat it back here and report to Lamonte."

I frowned, but did not answer. Again Benton read my thought.

"You needn't be afraid of his not carrying on, or of any graft stuff. He's a sort of *Javert*—a natural born policeman. Once he got the goods on anybody, they couldn't fix him if they owned the island. He may be having them shadowed now for all we know. Police methods are more or less alike the world over. They don't spill everything they do."

"He scarcely listened when I described that girl's looks and actions on seeing Carol in the car," I objected.

"I'll bet he didn't miss anything. My own opinion about that is this—she thought you had got Carol drunk, and she was disgusted with you both. That sort of stuff may get past back home just now, if one's to believe what one reads, but it isn't done on Martinique." He lowered his voice. "Jasmine may have got a whiff, or may have seen the way our tourists lap it up in the hotels here and at Pointe-à-Pitre. She visits in Guadeloupe."

"That's possible," I admitted. I thought of one or two parties at home where I had been pretty well disgusted myself. "Nowadays, when Americans get out of their own country, they're like boys let out of a reformatory school. They're apt to lose their heads and all sense of the fitness of things. All the same, I'm going to see what I can find out. I'd go off my chump roosting around here, listening to the other roosters and the dogs and cats and tree frogs and gramophones and pianolas and church bells and steamships. Since I can't sleep anyhow, I might as well take a ride."

Our conversation was interrupted in a disconcerting manner. The two ladies under discussion pushed back their chairs from the table. Evidently they were leaving, and I did not believe that Bosmiess could possibly have got around so soon. I said as much to Benton.

"I'll run down to the garage and get my Elizabeth," said he, and bolted off with his habitual quick action.

Jasmine did not glance my way as they rose, but the older woman did, and I got another shock. For a moment I looked into a face on which all tragedy was etched, all passions printed; and yet it was a beautiful face in contour and features. If one could picture a sort of sensuous Madonna, stricken, heartbroken, yet consecrated to some ruthless vengeance on her persecutors, then this was her portrait.

Once, I thought, the mother had been as lovely as her daughter. Her throat was still full and perfect. Though large of bust, her figure had a sweeping grace, and her full, long arms, bare beneath their open lace, were flawless in their symmetry and taper, with delicate little wrists and small, patrician hands. But the face, with all of its tragic beauty, sent a shudder through me. It was that of a Charlotte Corday.

All of this I got in about one-tenth the time it takes to tell—less than that, an instantaneous photograph on my retinas. Then she swept out ahead of the other, flinging a light silk shawl around her splendid shoulders as she went.

Unlike the usual syncopated shower, the rain was still crashing down; but the pair did not seem to notice it. Their costumes were washable, no doubt, and the intensity of the humid heat and the warmth of the rain itself made a little wetting negligible. Their car was directly in front of the open door of the hotel, and they stepped across the sidewalk and got into it.

I had taken my hat from the rack, and I went through the salon and out by a door that opened on the street at its farther end. This placed me just around the corner of the street by which they would pass.

The town was plunged in darkness, the steady deluge having short-circuited the wires, as might the stream from a hose. This not infrequently happens to the street lights in Fort de France during such a downpour. The big car, with two spare tires attached behind, moved past where I stood in the shadow of its glaring headlights. I sprinted after it, risking a tumble, grabbed at the spare tires and the top rest, and managed to swing up and wedge myself with fair security.

" Here we are, all going along together!" said I to myself, with a sort of sardonic inward grin.

VII

Almost immediately I discovered, to my intense disgust, that we were heading not for Casanovia, but for the road to St. Pierre. So far as Benton and I had been able to discover, Carol had been carried in precisely the opposite direction.

For a moment I was tempted to slip off and let the car go on without me. There did not seem to be much sense in riding for a couple of hours in what threatened to become a painfully cramped position—this punctuated by repeated thumps on different parts of me; but there I was, and a natural distaste for quitting a job once started kept me there. At least I might find out where these people were going, and why. Getting back to Fort de France was a matter to be considered when the necessity arrived.

So, like a tramp settling down for a long-distance run on the bumpers, I began to drape myself as comfortably as possible, and managed in some measure to guard against the danger of fractures, dislocations, and contusions.

We ran abruptly out of the shower, the leaky clouds traveling in a direction opposite to our inland course. There came a glare in the sky, and an enormous moon blazed out, to make the heavy, glistening foliage look like extravagant stage scenery. The big car with its powerful motor bucketed up the grade with a whining purr of relish, like a hunting dog loosed for the chase. Didier flashed past, its bright windows a torchlight procession on the run. The air cooled and sweetened, and my eardrums crackled. Below was a deep, mysterious valley, where, under the witch mist drawn like a tent from the high slopes opposite, almost anything might happen.

It was suddenly borne in upon me that for all the peaceful reputation Benton gave it, one could never tell about so passionate a piece of volcanic outcrop as this strange island. It fairly reeked of passion, raw as the ratafia it produced, in its gorgeous, flaming vegetation, in its tumbling mountains on which clouds sprawled, in the single garments of barbaric hue worn by its women.

This isle a good little law-abiding paradise? Not much! Covert, perhaps, and with a motto of live and let live, love and be loved, laugh and kiss and clasp in tenuous, hectic embrace, and afterward sleep swooningly through the midday heat. Don't steal, of course, but why steal, with food hanging from the trees and rum to be had for the asking or making? Laugh and play and have a good time, and don't get mad. Obey the law, since it cost nothing so to do. Keep clean and fresh and pretty—not difficult with a shower bath three times a day to fill the cataracts, and the clear, warm, limpid sea.

The passion was always there, notwithstanding, a latent force needing only circumstance for its unleashing. The face of Mme. Saint Cyr had opened my eyes, like a nine-day pup blinking at a flame upon the hearth with ashes under it, and now my vision was clearing even more.

I began to think that Benton had been talking through his hat. I was convinced that I knew more about that pepperpot yclept Martinique than he did. Benton's social and business relations, peregrinations, flirtations, might be conventional, or perhaps idyllic. He was a sort of faun among softly tinted, laughing nymphs; but I was up against one of the deep, volcanic passions of the place.

For the first time I had no fault to find with the speed of the car. It had my tacit permission to do its hundred an hour if it liked; and it appeared to like. We got to the top of the pass before I realized it, bucketed down the curving descent, and flicked across the bridge at Alama, where we were wont to bathe. Down, down we went, with a whining of brakes and a hot smell of metal in my nostrils. The brilliant moon swam in a sky pricked out with anæmic stars, and splashed the wet foliage with a misty wash of silver.

Suddenly we slowed, then turned off the road, and began to descend into what seemed an inland sea of sugar cane, stretching as far as the eye could reach, until fetched up by the flanks of containing mountains. We plunged into this expanse to thread our way through it, like the children of Israel walking their groove across the Red Sea.

Then, peering around the body of the car, I was startled to see close at hand the lighted windows of a house standing in a cleared space, with what I took to be a crusher, a still house, and other outbuildings off to the side. We were slowing to stop, and at any moment a servant might come out. I flopped off the rear as well as my stiffened muscles would permit, and took a dive into the cane.

Watching from my ambush, and in no danger of discovery if they had no dogs, I saw a thin, elderly woman, who appeared to be white, come out on the steps in front of the main entrance. The car stopped, and the native chauffeur leaped down to open the door. The women alighted and entered the house, and the car rolled on to a garage.

I sat down to reflect. My first conviction was that I had made a fool of myself, that Lamonte and Benton were right. These people could have nothing to do with Carol's disappearance. For one thing, we had traced the car in which she had been driven off to the road for Casanovia, after proving that no such car had taken this direction at or about that time. Moreover, they would scarcely have had time to bring Carol here and get back to the hotel, to prove an alibi, at the hour when I had seen them.

Glancing at my watch, I saw that it had taken us a little more than an hour to make the run, and we had fairly flown. I could not be sure that it had been less than two hours from the time of Carol's disappearance to that of my seeing Mme. Saint Cyr in the dining room of the hotel. Benton and I had consumed a good bit of time in talking to the student and waiting for Bosmiess, and in stopping to question people along the road. After that had come the tragic telling of the news to Mr. Grosvenor, the time spent in waiting for the doctor to come and make his examination, and the interview with Lamonte. After that we had bathed and changed for dinner, and I had shaved. Yes, more than two hours had been spent, I felt assured.

I was there, and I did not intend to leave without an examination of the premises; but not that night. I would wait until morning, then walk in and say that my car had broken down on the way to St. Pierre, and ask if any of the household were going into town and could give me a lift. This place must be very near St. Pierre, I thought, but I could say that I wanted to get back to Fort de France. The mere demeanor of the people, on seeing me, ought to tell me something.

I decided to wait until nine o'clock, on the off chance that they might go themselves to Fort de France—to church, perhaps, or on some other errand.

The next consideration was where to pass the night. We had crossed a roaring little torrent on entering the cane fields, and the sound of it now reminded me that I was thirsty. I decided to camp beside the stream, which would also provide me with a morning bath; so I slipped out of my ambush and walked back to the bridge. There I found a narrow but well beaten path leading down along the edge of the bank, and this I had no trouble to follow in the vivid moonlight.

I came presently to a fall with a pool beneath it. No sooner had I clambered down to the edge of this than I recognized, beyond all doubt, the scene of Mme. Dieudonné's photograph. So here at last I had curiously stumbled on Diana's pool! I smiled grimly to think how my sentiments for the goddess had altered.

On the farther bank the heavy foliage of a mango tree offered shelter in the event of another shower. I took off my coat, rolled it inside out for a pillow, and stretched out on the warm, moist sward. Contrary to all expectation, I immediately fell asleep.

The short-lived dawn awakened me, refreshed by the first really good night's sleep that I had enjoyed on Martinique, because of the heat. Here it was warm enough, but the air was sweeter and fresher, and I have always loved to sleep in the open. The little waterfall splashed an invitation not to be declined, so I slipped off my clothes and plunged into the pool.

I was nearly dressed—in shoes, trousers, and a sleeveless shirt—when I heard above the churning of the fall the clear lilt of a girl's voice singing. Looking across to the opposite bank, I caught a flash of color, and here came Jasmine Saint Cyr in a blue Chinese kimono, evidently to take her morning bath.

There was barely time for me to flatten out behind a flowering bush, and it was rather an openwork bush at that. I did not want to be a *Peeping Tom,* but there seemed to be no help for it. Of course, all that I had to do was to close my eyes; but it is one thing to make a noble resolution, and quite another to stick to it. I am ashamed to say that my lids refused to close. They seemed, in fact, to be held open by a spring.

Jasmine slipped off her kimono and grass slippers, and stepped daintily down to the edge of the pool. Most of her charming self was inclosed in a shimmering white silk *robe Josephine*—a sort of dainty adaptation of the native shift—her nighty, I suppose. She waded out until the cool, clear water swirled around her knees, then flung herself forward into the pool. The bank shelved off steeply, and she rose and stood in water bosom deep.

A good many wild thoughts went through my head as I watched that young goddess splash about in the pool. I had still wilder thoughts when presently she waded out and stood on the sun-splashed bank of gravel, wringing out the heavy tresses of her wet hair, which swept the pebbles at her feet as she stooped toward me. Not that these thoughts of mine were of the sort I might be ashamed to tell. I wished that I had a schooner down there at St. Pierre, and a car waiting on the road. I should have stolen that girl and held her as hostage for the return of Carol. I cannot be blamed if my imaginings rushed on past this, and pictured Jasmine as unwilling to leave me when the time for parting came.

The tumultuous state in which I found myself was interrupted by a liquid, throaty call from up the bank:

"Jasmine, why did you not wait a moment for me?"

I saw Mme. Saint Cyr swinging down along the path with a sort of regal step, which yet was light.

"But I thought you were not coming, *maman,*" Jasmine protested. "You said last night that you were altogether exhausted, and would sleep late."

Mme. Saint Cyr shrugged her bare, shapely shoulders, from which she had slipped her own kimono—which was like that of her daughter, but a flaming red.

"*Eh bien!*" said she. "I rested better than I had expected."

She walked to the edge of the pool, attired much as Jasmine. Here were Juno and Diana, unless either of those goddesses was a blonde. It might perhaps be more fitting to call them Ceres and Proserpine, with myself a lurking Pluto.

Ceres now plunged in. She gave a little shriek, for the water was spring-fed and cold, and waded out, making little faces as the rough pebbles hurt her feet. Then, turning to her daughter, she said in a hard, clear voice:

"I'm going to tell you that it was enough to exhaust even my own considerable nervous force—the strain of carrying off that little fool, under the very nose of the adventurer whom Edmée warned me against, and then having to look at him during that horrid dinner at the hotel. But I don't think we need worry about him now!"

She clipped her speech short. Perhaps the shock of hearing what she had just said may have resulted in some slight involuntary movement on my part; or it may have been that she was primitive enough, savage enough, to feel the tremendous current of mental impulse flowing between us, so that it drew her eyes my way.

Whatever the cause, I saw that I was discovered. She had half turned and was stooping to glare at me. Her lowered head looked flat on top, like the head of a leopardess in a startled pose. Her face was terrible, her eyes lambent. I could imagine how, had it been dark, they might have given off that lightless sheen known as the retinal reflex. Of humans, only gypsies have it, they say.

Mme. Saint Cyr looked as if she might have some gypsy blood in her veins. At this moment, indeed, she looked as if she might have had jaguar blood there. One forgot that she was a beautiful woman. She seemed like some dangerous feral creature which one must slay immediately, and without compunction, if one would be safe from its deadly stroke.

Finding myself discovered, I rose and walked down to the edge of the stream. Jasmine saw me then, and screamed. Both of them slipped into their kimonos, *madame* thrusting her hands into the pocket of her own. Her face had gone a chalky white, but Jasmine's was crimson.

They both stood watching me in silence, and with a curiously expectant look. I could not tell from their expressions whether they were more outraged or frightened, and I did not care. I had just heard what I wanted to know.

Standing on the edge of the stream, I addressed *madame*.

" Please don't think I came here to spy upon your bath, ladies," I said. " I must apologize for that. I came to discover what you have done with Mlle. Grosvenor. Having accomplished this purpose, I shall retire with renewed expressions of apology and regret."

What immediately followed this complacently assured harangue still chills my blood a little to remember, it was so entirely unexpected, so fatally cool and final. Mme. Saint Cyr's hand was slowly drawn from the slash pocket of her kimono, and it gripped an automatic pistol—a thirty-two, to judge from its size.

" You are not going to retire, *mon ami*," said she in a curiously thin and reedy voice, unlike her rich contralto. " You are going to die!"

She raised the pistol and leveled it at my chest. Though in no doubt of her intention, I stood fast, straight and erect—not that I had any hope of bluffing her, for I was as sure that she meant to kill me as one can be of anything; but because she was so near, and so evidently determined to kill me, that it did not seem worth the sacrifice of dignity to try to escape. No, I merely made the best of it, as might any man of pride and sense on being stood up against a wall for execution by a firing squad.

" This is my finish," I said to myself.

I stared her in the eyes, but I might as well have tried to stare down a fer-de-lance, the deadly snake of Martinique. The weapon in her hand was as steady as if held in a vise.

Then she pulled the trigger.

VIII

A SCORCHING pain darted through my right arm. I laughed.

" *Madame* is more to be complimented on her determination than on her skill with the pistol," I said. " One scarcely misses at the width of this brook—about four meters."

Not the slightest change showed in her face. She raised the pistol again, and it came to rest as before.

Jasmine threw back her head, gave a wild and piercing scream, then covered her face with her hands and sank down on the gravel. Evidently the girl knew her mother. I began to understand Mme. Saint Cyr myself.

She fired again. A scorching pain shot through my left arm, and it hung limper even than the right. There was no tonic contraction of the biceps muscle. A nerve must have been cut by the bullet. The arm felt numb, but after the first shock there was little pain.

" I see that I was mistaken about the skill of *madame* with the pistol," said I politely. " Pray accept my apology; but it would never have occurred to me that any daughter of France, even remote from the mother country, would stoop to torture her enemy before she killed him. Now for the third and center shot—a little to the left, if you please!"

She stared at me fixedly for a moment; then, to my real surprise, she lowered the pistol. I glanced at Jasmine and saw her peeping through her fingers. Looking from her to her mother, I thought I caught the suspicion of a smile on *madame's* set lips.

" I changed my mind about you when I saw that you were not a coward," said she. " Lift up your arms."

Trying to obey, I found the effort too painful.

" Turn your back," *madame* ordered.

" Not even for you," I answered as lightly as I could, for sensibility was coming back with a rush. " I'll face the final shot, if you please. It's a family habit."

" Then come here to me," she peremptorily commanded.

" Any man would hasten to obey such an order from such a source," I answered, trying to be gay and debonair.

I waded across the brook. Jasmine rose as I did so, and stood staring at me with an inscrutable expression on her lovely face. Mme. Saint Cyr, still gripping the pistol in one hand, seized my wrist and raised first one of my helpless arms and then the other.

"Clean through," she remarked, as if to herself.

"Not bad shooting, for a lady," I murmured. "*Mes compliments, madame!*"

She looked me up and down from under her straight, dark brows, and there was a most peculiar expression in her slaty eyes. I could not tell whether it was more hostile than curious. It seemed as if she was examining some new and hitherto unknown type of the genus *homo.*

I stood before her with as much nonchalance as I think could be worn by a man in trousers and sport shirt who had just been drilled through both arms by a thirty-two-caliber steel-jacketed bullet. Thank Heaven it was not a dumdum! As I was heavy of bone and muscle, the high velocity missile had left a clean little hole.

"Do you consider yourself to be a gentleman?" she asked.

"A gentleman and an officer, *madame,*" I answered. "My object was not to spy on you, but to discover, if possible, what you have done with Miss Grosvenor, who had been intrusted to my care when you lured her away."

Jasmine, who had moved toward me, offered her bit.

"She was also in your care when lying drunk in the car, was she not?"

"That was not my fault. She was very thirsty, and helped herself indiscreetly when my back was turned."

"What makes you think that I lured her away?" asked Mme. Saint Cyr.

"I was given a description of you and of the car by a man who saw her drive away with you. I can't imagine why you wanted to carry her off, any more than I can understand her going with you; but if your motive was to pay off some old grudge against her father, then you may be pleased to know that your act has been crowned with brilliant success."

Her lids narrowed a little. It was practically certain that in so talkative a place as the Hôtel de la Paix she must have learned of the stroke suffered by the millionaire American yachtsman.

"Why should you think that I had any such motive?" she asked.

I decided instantly to bluff.

"Because, *madame,* I happen to be not only the sailing master of Mr. Grosvenor's yacht, but the son of one of his old friends, and I enjoy his confidence."

She shot me a look of contempt.

"That is a lie! If you had known that it was I who had carried off the girl, you would not be here alone. You would have come immediately with the police."

"Well," I retorted, "at any rate I know it now. A few moments ago I heard you say so yourself."

"That is apt to cost you dear," she said.

"It seems to have done so already," I returned. "Of course, you can murder me, if you think it worth your while, or that your safety depends upon it; but I'll offer you a bargain. If you'll send Miss Grosvenor and myself immediately to Fort de France, I'll give you my word of honor that there shall be no further action taken in this matter."

Jasmine, who had been staring at me with a horror-stricken face, turned to her mother.

"Please agree to that, *maman*—please!" she begged. "You have already gone too far."

But Mme. Saint Cyr shook her head.

"I have gone too far to withdraw; and what's his word of honor worth? A spying scoundrel! A lying adventurer—like his employer at the same age! You know what Edmée said about him. When he saw that there was nothing to be gained in her direction, he threatened to come here and hunt you out."

"Did Mme. Dieudonné really write you that?" I asked.

My question was ignored.

"Then he manages to win Grosvenor's confidence," she continued; "and what is his first act? To compromise his employer's silly daughter, whom her father was fool enough to intrust to his care. You saw for yourself, Jasmine. No doubt his villainous plan was to force the girl into a marriage, knowing that her father was not likely to live much longer. Failing in that, he sneaks out here for blackmail. Otherwise he would not have come alone. To brim over his villainy, he has dishonored you and me, and—"

Again Jasmine interrupted. She evidently saw that her mother was working herself into a passion that might have a sudden tragic ending at almost any minute.

"But, *maman,*" she implored, "look at him! He does not stand there like a villain, even after you have shot him through both arms. I do not believe everything that Edmée says. Her letter sounded like spite to me—like revenge; and we both know what Edmée can be when wounded in her vanity."

Mme. Saint Cyr's set features seemed to ease a little of their tension.

"What have you to say for yourself?" she demanded. "My friend Mme. Dieudonné has described you to me as an unscrupulous adventurer."

I managed a shrug of indifference.

"She might more truthfully have described me as a fool," I answered.

"If you did not come here to spy on my daughter, or perhaps something worse, then why did you come to this particular place?"

"For the same reason as you and your daughter, *madame,*" I answered. "I came for a refreshing morning bath. Fortunately, I had finished it before your arrival. I was just about to go up to the house to ask what you had done with Miss Grosvenor."

"Do you deny that that young girl was drugged or intoxicated yesterday in your car?" Mme. Saint Cyr demanded.

"Call it intoxicated," I said, "but not for very long. You saw her yourself about fifteen minutes after your daughter had inspected her. If you are interested in the particulars of that indiscretion, I might refer you to the cafétier at Absalon, an honest man, or the chauffeur Bosmiess, who is another."

"How did you get here?" was the next step of this inquisition. My arms were beginning to hurt pretty badly, and I stooped to dip them in the stream; but Mme. Saint Cyr blazed out at me: "Leave your wounds alone. They shall be attended to directly. How did you get here, and when?"

"Last night, on the back of your car," I answered. "I thought better to wait for daylight to look the ground over. I was thirsty, and wanted to find a place to rest and bathe, so I came here."

"That is the truth, at least." She turned to Jasmine. "I saw a man dart out from around the corner as we were leaving the hotel, but I thought he was running across the street to get out of the rain. I observed that it was a big man in dark clothes and a white *casquette,* such as ships' officers wear. Go fetch his things, Jasmine."

The girl lifted the skirt of her kimono and waded across the brook, to return immediately with the compromising articles mentioned. *Madame* favored me with a wicked smile.

"You must have been far from comfortable," said she.

"I was in less discomfort than at this moment, *madame,*" I answered; "but then I did not enjoy such charming society."

Her sternness of expression relaxed a little.

"You had better sit down. Jasmine, run to the house and fetch some tincture of iodine and a gauze bandage. Bring Jean Baptiste back with you, in case he should need aid in walking to the house."

Jasmine shot me a worried look and flew off. Mme. Saint Cyr motioned to a low, flat bowlder.

"Seat yourself, if you please, *monsieur.*"

I bowed.

"When *madame* herself is seated."

With a little color returning to her cheeks, she sat down on a large stone, facing me. I followed her example, and managed to fold my arms.

"Are you in pain?" she asked.

"It is nothing, *madame.* I forget it, in looking at you."

"Perhaps I was too hasty; but I was furiously angry that you should have spied on us *en dishabille.* If you had shown any fear, I should have killed you."

"I expected to be killed," I answered; "but that has happened before. If my motive had been such as you first thought, I should have deserved to be killed. In fact," I added, with what must have struck her as a sort of childish candor, "I tried not to look, but I couldn't help it."

This brought a smile, in spite of her attempt to frown.

"Who are you? Is Fairfax really your name? Your French and your manners are not precisely what one would expect in a mere sailor, the captain of a rich man's yacht."

"My name is Fairfax," I said. "I am a soldier of fortune, and poor, but my family is as good as any in America. We cannot all be millionaires. It is too bad that we should have to meet like this, but it is not my fault."

"Nor mine," she said quickly. "If you were to know my story, *monsieur,* I do not think you would blame me."

"I do not think I blame you as it is, Mme. Saint Cyr. It is difficult to admit the existence of evil in so charming an envelope."

She laughed outright at this, then grew suddenly grave.

"What a pity that I am compelled to continue my ill treatment of you! But I have much, very much, at stake."

"I am quite content to accept your assurance that your action has seemed justified to you, at least," I said. "So charming and distinguished a lady could not commit such an act without being convinced that she was justified. I wish to be your friend."

She gave me a penetrating look.

"I am very much afraid that all Americans are liars," she said. "That, at least, has been my own unfortunate experience. I am old and wise!"

"Permit me to differ with you," I objected. "I have just enjoyed proof positive that you are neither the one nor the other."

She laughed unwillingly.

"Oh, la, la! I shoot the young man through both arms, and he has the impertinence to make me compliments!"

"A good deal more than that," I protested. "You inspire me to say a great many things, but I am restrained through fear of being misunderstood, because I am your prisoner. It might appear as if I were trying to soften your heart."

She nodded.

"I should certainly shoot you if you were to try to escape, though I should do so with deep regret. I cannot afford to take chances. There is too much at stake."

Her pretty face hardened again.

"It seems to me," I said, "that *madame* has taken some pretty big chances already. You have nothing to fear on my account, because I do not blame you for shooting me; but one does not abduct the daughter of a visiting American with impunity."

She looked up somberly, and the flush faded from her cheeks. Her slaty eyes became suddenly as opaque as the mineral of which their color reminded me. Then she startled me by saying, in perfectly good English:

"Grosvenor knows better by this time—or would, if he knew anything at all—than to denounce me for what I have done. If he were conscious, he would know quite well why this has happened, and he would not dare so much as to lodge a complaint with the *commissaire de police*. He would have forbidden you to meddle." She made a gesture of impatience. "I hadn't counted on its giving him a stroke of apoplexy. That has complicated everything, because it has endangered my position. You have yourself to blame if my treatment of you and this girl seems outrageous or unduly severe."

"So there's a bit of blackmail in the business!" I said, dropping gallantry.

She stamped her foot.

"There is not! Unless you call it blackmail to—" She checked herself. "Never mind! Some day, perhaps, you'll understand. We are not the bandits you think us. If Grosvenor dies, it may go hard for me; but if he lives, I have nothing to fear."

"Then you are decided to keep us two prisoners?" I asked. "You can't manage it for very long, you know."

"I have an idea that I can," she answered. "You may agree with me before long."

"Why not parole us?" I suggested. "It's downright cruel to keep that girl from her father."

She shook her head.

"I'd take your parole, but not hers. She has Grosvenor blood, and it's a treacherous strain. I'd never get another chance at her. Besides, she doesn't need to know that her father has had a stroke, and he doesn't know anything at all." She looked at me thoughtfully. "This stroke has made a frightful mess of things for all of us. It may result in a lot of trouble."

"'May' is inexact," I said, "with Grosvenor at death's door, his daughter a prisoner of her ill-wishers, and the goat of the business plugged through both arms. But your turn is pretty sure to come, you know!"

She chose to ignore this assurance. No doubt she had concluded that I was likely to prove an inconvenient prisoner, as soon as the power came back to my elbows; for she asked:

"If I take you back to town, will you give me your word of honor to take no further action in this matter? I will give you my own word that Grosvenor would not wish it."

I shook my head.

"I don't care whether he wishes it or not. He placed his daughter in my care, and I shan't make any terms unless she is released."

Madame frowned.

“ Then don’t blame me for whatever may happen to you both in the immediate future. After to-day, your jailer and hers will not be myself, but a man who has become well known and highly esteemed on Martinique, and who would be the very last to be suspected.”

“ Señor de Gonza?” I asked, remembering the name given me by the *commissaire*.

She looked surprised, and hesitated for a moment. Then she answered:

“ Yes. This affair does not concern him in any way, except as an old and devoted friend most eager to serve me in any way possible. This is his property. My daughter and I do not live here.”

“ No,” I said, “ you live out on the road to Fond Nigaud. You took Miss Grosvenor there yourself, and then Señor de Gonza brought her here, while you and your daughter dined at the hotel to establish an alibi.”

Mme. Saint Cyr listened entirely unmoved.

“ You have reconstructed admirably just what occurred; but it comes a little late—for you. It must be quite plain to you that I shall now have to keep you a prisoner until Mr. Grosvenor regains possession of his faculties.”

“ That might not be for weeks—might never be,” I said.

She frowned.

“ Of course, I hadn’t counted on his stroke; but Dr. Morry is hopeful of a speedy partial recovery, at least. I shall have to wait and see.”

“ And is Señor de Gonza to be Miss Grosvenor’s jailer?” I asked.

She flushed.

“ Count de Gonza is a gentleman and an old friend. This girl will be entirely safe with him; and she is not the sort to be frightened.”

“ You are right,” I agreed; “ but she is the sort to frighten some of the rest of you when she gets free. I don’t suppose you mean to have her strangled!”

“ She will take no action against me, if only for her own sake, when she learns the truth,” said Mme. Saint Cyr coldly. “ If Mr. Grosvenor should die, or remain clouded in mind, I shall tell her the reasons for my action and set her at liberty—and you, too; but if you try to escape, I cannot answer for the consequences.”

“ Nor I, if you persist in keeping us prisoners,” I said. “ You are laying up a lot of trouble for yourself. Your plan has failed through Mr. Grosvenor’s stroke and my coming here. You had better accept my offer and get out of this mess while there is still time. I told Mr. Benton, our American vice consul, that I suspected you and your daughter of having managed Miss Grosvenor’s abduction, and he knows that I followed you here. When I fail to return to Fort de France, you are likely to be arrested and examined.”

Her fine eyes shot me a look of contempt.

“ I suppose that is what you Americans call ‘ bluff ’! Fortunately, I happen to know all about it—and about you. My plan of action has been taken, for the present at least, and I am not a person to be frightened out of it. The affair has gone too far. Besides, I do not trust you!”

We were silent for several minutes after that. There was a curious numbness in both of my arms, but it did not prevent a dull aching. They seemed to be paralyzed, so that I could not flex the elbows at all. I felt a little nauseated. Rising to my feet, I took a deep breath or two and looked around.

“ Sit down!” Mme. Saint Cyr commanded. “ If you try to escape,” she added in a toneless voice, “ I shall have to shoot you through the leg.”

I sat down. Talk of pepperpots! Here evidently was one that had simmered for years with renewed infusions of the pepper, finally to boil over!

Jasmine, with two men, appeared on the path coming from the little bridge. She had changed into a white gown, not much paler in shade than her face. One of the men I recognized as the Count de Gonza, whom we had assisted on the road the day before. The other was an elderly, yellow man in a sort of white uniform, with a number of medals pinned across the left breast of his tunic.

Drawing near, Señor de Gonza stopped and stared at me with a troubled and, I thought, a slightly embarrassed expression. The other man—some sort of head servant, I judged—gave me a ferocious scowl, then stepped in front of Mme. Saint Cyr and saluted. His features were fierce and aquiline, not at all negroid. I observed with considerable surprise that he wore the Croix de Guerre, the Medaille Militaire, some Turkish decorations, and, most astonishing of all, our own American D. S. C.

Evidently he must have done something

pretty fine to have been decorated with this last, and under the eyes of an American officer whose command had been brigaded with French troops—fetching in wounded under fire, perhaps, or taking an enemy machine gun nest by which the Americans were being harassed, or something of the sort. I tried to raise my hand in a salute to the decoration, but, finding myself unable to get my hand to my head, I got my head to my hand.

The gesture did not escape the keen eyes of the old warrior. They flashed their recognition as he straightened up, brought his heels together, and returned my salute.

"We who have served—" he muttered, and glanced at Mme. Saint Cyr—a little challengingly, I thought.

Jasmine stared down at me with an intense expression in her dark violet eyes. Curiously enough, they reminded me of Carol's, though they were more striking, because of their double fringe of long black lashes and eyebrows that looked penciled.

"You fought in the war, *monsieur?*" she asked in a low, throaty voice.

"I swept up mines, *mademoiselle,*" I answered. "It is very possible that I had the honor to clean the channel ahead of your brave troops from Martinique."

"*Sapristi!*" growled the veteran.

He seemed on the point of bursting out with something, but he compressed his lips. I glanced at Señor de Gonza. His big chest was puffing in and out, and he was perspiring freely. In fact, he looked very much upset. Then I noticed that a gauze bandage encircled his head under the rim of his pith helmet, and I wondered if Carol had anything to do with that.

"Jean Baptiste"—Mme. Saint Cyr's voice was sharp—"you've had even more experience of wounds than I have. Look to those of *monsieur.*"

Jean Baptiste saluted briefly, and, stepping to where I sat, first touched the wounds of exit and entry with iodine, and then deftly threw a piece of bandage round them. Next he tested for a fracture, asked me to flex my arms, and nodded at my vain effort to do so.

"The bone may be touched, but I think the bullet has merely grazed it. No vessels are injured."

"But I've got no power in the muscles," I said.

"Shock, *m'sieur.* The important nerve is on the inside of the arm. The ball has passed on the outside of the bone and missed it, I think. Your hands feel as if asleep?"

"Precisely," I said, "as if I had struck the funny bone."

"Shock, and perhaps an injury to some smaller nerves. It may be that way for some time to come."

"You appear to understand wounds," I said.

"*Sapristi,* but I ought to! I have helped to dress enough of them. I am going to tell you that not many doctors have dressed more wounds than I. That was while recovering from a bayonet thrust in the chest, and, a second time, from one through the groin. I would not lie inactive, like many others. I assisted the doctors. Were your arms bare like this when shot, *monsieur?*"

"Yes," I said, "and clean. I'd just come out of the water."

"Then there is no danger of infection. All bullets are sterilized on leaving the muzzle of the piece. In three days you will be healed; but do not use your arms. How do you feel?"

"All right," I answered, which was not entirely the truth; "but I could do with a cup of coffee."

"Then let us return," said Jean Baptiste, and looked at *madame.*

She nodded. Jean Baptiste got me into my shirt and coat, and we walked back to the house, the old soldier holding my elbow in his iron grip. I was ushered into a spacious room handsomely furnished, and was left alone there on a divan.

Presently Jean Baptiste entered with a bowl of strong, black coffee.

"Drink this, *monsieur,*" said he, and I did so.

There was a peculiar taste to the coffee, but its effect was immediately soothing—so much so that a few moments after drinking it, I sank into a delicious sleep.

IX

I AWOKE to find myself in prison. It took me several moments to discover this fact, for I was drowsy and muddled in my head, and for some minutes I lay there trying to think up the recent sequence of events. Then, as my faculties slowly cleared and brought back recollection, I looked about to see what sort of place I had landed in.

It seemed to be a large storehouse, which had been hastily made habitable. It was constructed of stone set in cement, and there were three good-sized windows fitted with iron bars. Some grass mattings had been laid on the cement floor, and there were some chairs, an armoire, and a dressing table. In one corner stood a white enameled bedstead, with a mosquito net. Along the walls were shelves, loaded with bottles laid on their sides and tiered up compactly to the shelf above. There must have been several thousand of them, the corks sealed with wax.

In another corner were several casks on low frames, and in one of them there was a spigot and beside it a bottle corker. The place was evidently a sort of storehouse for the aging of rum. One end of it was partitioned off in pine planking and fitted with a door, which was closed.

In the center of the room hung an electric lamp—a lamp of about a hundred candle power, I thought. No doubt Señor de Gonza utilized the water power to furnish his current. I remembered having seen some wires along the edge of the stream.

Raising myself on the couch, I discovered beside it, on a table, a big bowl of fruit, with a loaf of bread, some cassava cakes in a silver dish, a *liard* of butter, apparently left in a bowl of ice, now melted, a red earthen water monkey, and a small bottle of red wine.

"Not bad prison fare," I thought. I stretched out an arm—it was still numb—for the water monkey, and in doing so I made a startling discovery. My arm had turned a dark brown—a mulatto brown—light chocolate, in fact.

"What the deuce?"

I swung my legs off the couch, and found that instead of my blue serge trousers I was wearing white drill ones. My feet were bare, in grass slippers, and as I glanced down at them I saw to my dismay that they also were brown. What devilish thing had happened to me?

However, the answer to this could wait. I tilted out half a glass of water and filled it up with wine. My numb fingers nearly dropped the bottle; but the draft refreshed me, and seemed to clear my head.

There was a mirror in a gilt frame over the dresser. I got up, crossed the room, and looked with astonishment at the individual reflected.

I was gazing at a mulatto—a brown man. I utterly failed to recognize myself. My nose is straight, but rather broad, like the rest of my face, and my lips are fairly full and wide; but my light-colored eyes shone strangely, and with a sort of sinister aspect, from that brown face. My hair, short and inclined to curl, was black, where previously it had been a light chestnut.

"Holy smoke!" I breathed, as it began to percolate through my mind that this was indeed my altered self. "They've gone and given me a mahogany stain!"

To discover how thoroughly this had been done, I pulled up my sleeveless shirt. Here was a muscular torso to match. They had made a finished job of me, and for a moment I felt inclined to laugh.

I was not long in guessing the reason for the change of color. If anybody were to get a glimpse of me, they would never suspect that I was a white man. There are plenty of pale-eyed mongrels on Martinique, and I had seen colored people with a good many different shades of blond hair.

Well, there was no help for it. I felt none the worse for the drug that must have been put in the bowl of coffee, and my appetite was keen. I ate a sugar apple and two bananas, and then demolished the heap of cassava wafers, with the butter, which was unsalted. This brought back my strength—even a little to my arms, I thought; and I walked to one of the windows and looked out.

There was not much to see — a cane crusher, a building which, from its tall chimney, I took to be the still house, some other outbuildings, and, beyond, the cane. Crossing to an opposite window, I saw what seemed to be the garage, then a chicken run and more cane. The premises were a sort of island in a sea of sugar cane.

The sun was shining brightly, and from its position I judged the time to be about three o'clock in the afternoon. Then, as I stood there wondering at what had happened, and at their daring to follow such a course of action, I heard a metallic squeak and a smothered gasp. I turned to see a most extraordinary tableau.

The door in the pine partition was open, and on the threshold stood a dark-haired girl, apparently a half-caste Carib, to judge from the faint copper color of her skin. She wore the ubiquitous *robe Josephine,* without sleeves, but with white stockings that had fallen down below her knees, and grass sandals. The light was streaming from behind her, but something in the shape and pose of her small head reminded me of Jasmine. Her features suggested those of Jasmine, too, though they were less delicate. She had the same broad, low forehead, eyes similarly set, and her mouth and her resolute chin were of the same contour.

My next impression was more disconcerting, for the girl held in her hand a cane hook—a sort of curved machete—and her expression seemed to indicate that she was organized for war. We stared at each other for several seconds without speaking. Then she asked in fairly good French, and in a voice which seemed to be on the point of breaking into a scream:

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

For a moment I could not speak. Then I managed to bleat out:

"Carol!"

She lurched against the frame of the door. The cane hook slipped from her hand and clattered down on the cement. She began to sob.

"B-b-brambles!"

I reached her in half a dozen strides, and tried to get my arm under hers, but could not manage it. She achieved the desired purpose by clinging to me, her head against my chest, sobbing and talking incoherently.

For the moment I was too furious to speak—too much overwhelmed at the indignity to which she had been put. Carol clung to me like the frightened little girl she was. While I was crazy to know what they had done to her, beyond the shameful evidence offered, it was apparent that her nervous tension would have to work itself off before she could give me any coherent story.

"Brambles!" she sobbed. "Put your arms around me! I—I want to feel your strength!"

"It's gone for the moment, Carol," I said. "I'm shot through both arms."

This statement acted as a tonic. She stopped sobbing. Holding me by my bare shoulders, she thrust herself back and stared at the bandages around my arm. Her violet eyes were round and dark with anger, or horror, or both.

"Oh, the brutes!"

"Sit down in that armchair," I said, "and let's swap experiences. First, tell me if you've been treated any worse than this!"

"No," she answered. "Not yet," she added in a lower voice.

I put her into the armchair.

"Pour yourself a glass of wine," I said.

Carol shook her head.

"I'm off that, Brambles. I've got to keep my wits about me."

"Good for you!" I said. "Now tell me what I'm dying to know—why did you go with that woman? Tell me all that happened from the moment I left you."

"Well, when you didn't come right back, Brambles, I got cross and impatient. Besides, I wanted to look at the Josephine statue; so I thought I'd walk across the Savana and come back around under the trees. I wanted to stretch my legs. As I got almost to the street, I saw a big car stop. This woman jumped out, came running over to me, and asked if I was not Miss Grosvenor. When I admitted it, she told me in a breathless way, and in very good English, that dad's car had skidded off the road near Fond Nigaud, and that he seemed to be hurt internally. She didn't think there was a moment to spare, she said. Of course, I thought of his heart. She said that she had offered to look for me. Do you blame me for getting right in with her?"

I shook my head.

"Of course not."

"She told me that a doctor had been sent for, and we dashed off. I was feeling pretty wabbly, what with the shock and with the effects of that beastly gin I was fool enough to drink at Absalon. Walking across the Savana in the sun seemed to have stirred it up again, so that I suddenly felt faint. She made me lie down across the seat, with my head in her lap. Then the rain came pelting down, and we stopped to rig the curtains. It must have been in front of a *pharmacie,* for this woman slipped out for a moment and brought me something that tasted like absinth. I gulped it down, and that's all that I remember until I woke up to find myself in that room, in bed, with a colored maid fanning me."

"Might have been paregoric," I said. "That tastes like absinth; or, for that matter, it might have been absinth. They make it here, and on top of the gin it might easily have put you down and out for a couple of hours."

"Where are we?" Carol asked.

"Away over by St. Pierre," I answered. "It's all pretty thick, but I should say that this woman shifted you into the car of an accomplice who brought you here. Is that all that happened you?"

"No," said Carol. "I woke up some time in the night, and saw a man coming into the room. There was a small lamp burning. I waited until he leaned over me, then I grabbed a water jug off the night table, and smashed it on his head. He went over backward with a yell, and another man — a native — rushed in. They both began to tell me that they meant no harm, and that I needn't be afraid. Then they went out and sent back the maid, who stayed with me until morning. She pretended not to understand French. She spoke the local *patois*, and I can't understand that."

I thought of the bandage around Señor de Gonza's head, and felt like chuckling. Evidently Carol was still unaware that her face and hair had been dyed, for she glanced down at her bare forearms—which were a ruddy ivory, scarcely more than reddish gold, in tint—and asked:

"What makes my skin so yellow? Do you think that rotten mixture of booze and dope has given me the jaundice?"

"It's enough to," I said; "but I don't think it's that. Go look at yourself in the glass." Then, to save her further shock as much as possible, I added: "They've let you off easier than they did me. They've turned you into a pretty half-caste Carib."

Carol stared at me aghast, then rushed over to the mirror. She gave a gasp of dismay, took another look at her really charming reflection, and then, to my relief, began to laugh. A sudden idea striking her, she snatched at the open neck of the gown, and drew it away from her shoulder, where the skin revealed its normal milky whiteness.

"Just your face and neck and arms and hands," I said consolingly. "They've dyed me to the waist!"

She began to laugh again, still staring at her reflection; but there was a note to her mirth that I did not like.

"Never mind the comedy," I said sharply. "We've got to think of what we're going to do."

"Well, what is there to do?" she demanded. "Tell me, first, what happened to you, and how you got here."

I gave her a brief account of all that had taken place from the moment of my return to the car to find her gone—omitting, of course, her father's stroke and that part of my conversation with Mme. Saint Cyr that had reference to it.

"How did dad take it?" she asked.

"Oh, he took it quietly," I answered, truthfully enough. "It looked like a case of kidnaping for ransom."

She seemed a little hurt, I thought.

"I'm surprised at his taking it quietly. Dad adores me as much as I do him; but I suppose I've given him so much cause for worry at different times that he's got used to it. I wonder who and what these people are!"

"Adventurers," I told her. "The West Indies are full of such smooth, plausible, accomplished crooks. The only thing for your father to do, when he thinks it over, is to pay what they ask and try to nail them afterward."

"But why should they want to make us look like natives, if they're going to keep us locked up here? Do you suppose they mean to keep us doped?"

I shook my head.

"That would hardly be safe. The chances are they intend to ship us to some other place—to take us off the island, perhaps. They've managed pretty well so far, but Martinique's not big enough to pull off this sort of a stunt. The worst of it is that I'm as helpless to prevent it as a man with two arms amputated."

"Poor, dear Brambles!" Carol reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. "I don't much care what happens so long as we're together, and they don't seem to object to that. Dad won't stick at the ransom, so the chances are we'll soon be free."

Of course, I knew differently—knew that while it might be a ransom job in a way, with some sort of blackmail to back it up, yet even in that case there was no telling when Mr. Grosvenor would be able to settle the score, if he ever could. Mme. Saint Cyr did not mean to let Carol go, no doubt considering that her hold on the man, whatever it might be, was insufficient to gain her ends without the added ace of his daughter's custody.

Evidently the woman had some sort of lien on the rich American's purse, and on his fears. It was possible that a man of his headstrong temperament might have committed some crime of which she had the proof. I could imagine him in his youth, or as a man of thirty, to have been the sort of individual who might easily have let a burst of passion get away with him; and Carol had not been very clear as to why he had left Martinique, once having got a profitable venture started there.

It was scarcely worth while to bother about that now. If Mme. Saint Cyr and Jasmine had indeed departed for their own residence, then here we were absolutely in the power of Señor de Gonza, who was evidently a pretty bad lot. I was comforted, however, by the fact that he had imprisoned us together, whatever the compromising features of such a position might be. He would scarcely have done this if guilty of any evil designs on Carol.

She leaped up now and ran back to examine her reflection in the mirror again—this time more calmly and critically.

" I don't make such a bad-looking native, do I, Brambles?" She gave a little laugh. " At least they did their job artistically, though they got a curious tint. This Mother Hubbard thing is clean, and a lovely color. With a few sprays of bougainvillea in my hair I think I'd be rather fetching. They laid it on thicker for you, but " —she turned and looked at me, her head aslant—" it's not so unbecoming. You look like a big, brawny *Othello*."

" Useless brawn," I muttered. " Jean Baptiste told me that the numbness would be only temporary; but I have a hunch that both bones are drilled, and that the lack of power in my arms may be a sort of physiological protection against my making a muscular effort that might snap them."

" Then, for Heaven's sake, don't try!" said Carol. " I'll supply the arms." She flung one of hers across the back of my neck, and rested her cheek against my shoulder. " It makes a lot of difference having you with me, Brambles dear! My spirits were getting pretty low."

" Did they do you as well as they did me?" I asked.

" A lot better. I've got a real room, not a boozorium hastily rigged up, for habitation. Come and look at it!"

She drew me to the open door. It was really an attractive lodging, if one overlooked the barred windows, the walls freshly calcimined with a pink wash, and the cement floor strewn with rugs. The bed was like my own, with a fresh mosquito net, and there were some good pieces of furniture; also several engravings of a martial character, and a good lithograph, " La Délivrance." This struck me as somewhat ironical under the circumstances, but even less so than a large crucifix, with a *prie-dieu* in front of it.

Everything was spotlessly clean, and the bed linen was fine and snowy white. In one corner a dressing room was screened off by some very fine Chinese embroideries on silk, in rosewood frames. There were also book shelves, which held a heterogeneous collection of paper volumes and reviews. Glancing at these, I noticed that they were nearly all of a military character; and this, and a rack of outlandish knives, such as a veteran soldier of the French Republic might have collected during campaigns in Madagascar, Algeria, and Cochin China, led me to believe that this must be the abode of Jean Baptiste, and that it had been assigned as Carol's prison because of its iron door and barred windows.

Through one of these latter the house could be seen—a really charming residence; but there was nobody in evidence.

" They told me, if I wanted anything, to tie a napkin on one of the bars," Carol said. " It's not so bad—now that you are here!" She looked at the weapons on the wall, and took down a long, wicked-looking knife. " They forgot these things, or they didn't count on Yankee scrapping qualities. If I hadn't been too dopy to discover them last night, the guy that abducted me would be a dead bird!"

" I haven't been fair to you, Carol," I said. " Yesterday I thought you a hopeless irresponsible, and here you've kept up your courage through what would have sent most girls off their chump. More than that, you've cut out the rum, with a whole cask of it on tap."

She laughed.

" Couldn't afford to get blurred in this fix, Brambles dear. Besides " — she shot me a look full of mischief—" you said you'd never marry a rummy."

She pushed her head against my chest; but I was staring through the barred window. De Gonza and Jean Baptiste, both with pistols on their hips, had come around the corner of the house and were walking toward our prison.

X

" FRESH developments!" I said. " Don't give them any cheek. They might separate us, you know."

" Hooray!" cried Carol. " I'll bet dad's paid the ransom!"

" Stop and think, my dear girl," I said, for it did not seem right to let her persist in this vain hope. " If it was a ransom business, do you believe they would have brought you to a place that so many people would be sure to recognize from your description of it?"

Her face fell.

"That's so. Well, what is it, then?"

"Some old grudge, apparently, and some sort of hold they seem to have on your father to prevent him from taking punitive action against them."

She looked startled.

"Then where do we get off?"

"It's not going to be so easy," I said. "I'm telling you this to keep you from getting high-handed. It looks to me as if they held the trumps, and knew it." I nodded toward the knife, which she had dropped on the floor. "Shove that thing under the bed."

She had barely done so when the heavy iron door squealed on its hinges and opened a foot or two. Jean Baptiste stuck in his grizzled head.

"Come in," I said. "There's nothing to fear."

He gave a grunt.

"*Sapristi!* As if it would matter to me that there was anything to fear—to me, who have led assaults as most men go out pigsticking!"

I could not refrain from saying:

"M. de Gonza might feel differently about it. *Mademoiselle* was frightened, and lost her head."

The old war dog gave me a grin, then came in, followed by the count, who gave us both a frown. All the same, he looked embarrassed. Perhaps to hide this, he began to bluster.

"I thought I told you to lock that door," he stormed at Jean Baptiste. "Are you going to obey my orders, or are you not? Here they are together, no doubt planning some fresh deviltry! You can never tell about these accursed Yankees. You think you've got them by the tail, and they twist around and sink their fangs in you!"

To this burst of nervous ill temper Jean Baptiste paid slight respect. In fact, I thought I heard him mutter something about being the servant of *madame*. Then he asked:

"And your arms, *monsieur?*"

"No better that I can see," I answered. "I hope you're right about them, but I doubt it."

"Of course I am right!" he snapped. "No man living, I don't care who, has seen more wounds of every sort than I. I've had enough myself to kill a dozen ordinary men. I was once shot through the shinbone with a Mauser, and the leg was dead like your arms for a couple of days."

"Enough!" Señor de Gonza growled impatiently. "That door must be kept locked. They cannot be allowed together in this disgraceful way. It is not proper, and I shall get the blame for it." He glared from me to Carol, his bushy eyebrows working up and down. "*Mademoiselle,* you ought to be ashamed of yourself—and you the daughter of a millionaire!"

I stared at him open-mouthed, too much astonished to laugh. Upon my word, the fellow was in earnest. He was actually shocked! Apparently it was one thing to abduct an heiress, have her stripped and dyed, dress her in a single shift, and lock her up in a rum storehouse, but quite another to lock up a male compatriot in the same apartment with her! Even Jean Baptiste got something of the idea, and his fierce, seamed face looked a little dubious.

"You needn't worry, *monsieur,*" I said, managing to gulp back my laughter. "It is quite the custom in our country for young people of opposite sexes to be left alone together. We trust more to the chivalry of the man and virtue of the young lady than to locked doors and shut-eyed chaperons."

"So I have been told," he grunted. "I have also heard that it often results unfortunately. This young lady is in my charge. Last night, in her confusion, she mistook my motive. I wished to assure myself that she was sleeping naturally, and was none the worse for her potions. My cracked head is witness to the fact that she was not prostrated; but hereafter the door must be locked."

"If that door is locked," cried Carol, "I shall scream so loud that they'll hear me in Fort de France! I'll not eat, and I'll scratch the eyes out of anybody that comes near me!"

Old Jean Baptiste looked very much disturbed.

"Let her have her way, *monsieur,*" he muttered. "They're the devil, these young American women — worse than Russians; and the young man is not ordinary. *Noblesse oblige!*"

De Gonza was still dissatisfied.

"It is not *comme il faut,*" he said angrily. "They're only half dressed. That door—"

"Oh, forget the door!" I interrupted. "Have you come to give us any news, or to make a bargain, or what?"

"There is no news," he growled, "except that you are now to take your orders entirely from me—worse luck! The only bargain to be made with you two is that as long as you are well behaved, you shall be well treated, and *vice versa.* I am not a man to be trifled with!"

The bluster with which he made this statement gave me at once an entirely different slant on him. Up to this moment I had taken it for granted that he was the archvillain of the piece; but suddenly I saw him in a different light—as a frightened old fraud, normally easy-going when affairs went along with him, but easily influenced, and no doubt quite capable of scoundrelism if the pressure brought to bear was heavy enough.

"Your supper will be sent directly," he said. "You may have it together. When the *brigadier* comes to clear away the things, he will see to it that *mademoiselle* enters her room, and he will lock the door and bring the key to me."

"Then you'll hear from me!" said Carol hotly. "One of us might be taken ill in the night, what with all your druggings and shootings!"

"Then you have only to call out," the count snapped. "You shock and pain me, *mademoiselle.* You seem to forget that you are the daughter of a multimillionaire, and as such must consider your good name."

"You seem to class multimillionaires with royalty, or with the Holy Family," said Carol. "In America you can scarcely flick away a cigarette butt without hitting a millionaire!"

"And they pull together," I cut in hastily. "If anything should happen to Mr. Grosvenor or his daughter, all his multimillionaire associates, both social and financial, would march to the White House in a body and make a demonstration. There may be an international complication over this affair!"

This evidently did not cheer up our jailer. Carol was quick to catch her cue.

"Evidently *monsieur le comte* does not know much about America and Americans," she said in a pleasanter voice.

De Gonza looked considerably upset.

"You are right," said he. "I went there once in the winter, about fifteen years ago, but I could not stay long enough to penetrate the interior and study the habits and customs of the natives. The houses and hotels were too hot. I thought I should suffocate!"

Here was another new idea—complaining of our northern heat on Martinique!

"They insisted on my drinking cocktails, too," said he; "and I found myself in danger of becoming an alcoholic."

I glanced around at the solid rampart of rum that lined my prison; then I looked at Carol and smiled. Most Americans would not make much fuss at being forced to languish here, I thought.

"Now about that door," said Carol. "It relieves my nerves to be able to talk to Captain Fairfax. Besides, we are *fiancés.*"

This lie was a happy inspiration, for to South American Catholics a betrothal is almost as binding as a marriage. De Gonza was evidently impressed, though not fully convinced.

"*Mes félicitations,*" said he, with a bow. "Nevertheless, I feel it my duty to see that the conventionalities are followed."

This was a little too stiff for my ideas of consistency.

"Do you call it observing the conventionalities to drug and kidnap the daughter of a multimillionaire, and then to have her stripped and stained to look like a native, and clothed in a peasant smock?" I demanded savagely. "If you are going to make us look like natives, you can't blame us if we feel and act like them!"

He threw out his hands in protest.

"The disguise was necessary for our protection, if obliged to remove you to another place, where you might be exposed to observation. The stain can be immediately removed by a solution of oxalic acid, but it would be useless for you to try to wash it off with water. You do not understand what is behind all this. If you did, you could realize that we are justified, at least with our own consciences. You must try to be patient. I shall go now, and Jean Baptiste will bring your supper."

And with a rather ceremonious bow our worried jailer left us, followed by the *brigadier.* Presently the old soldier returned, carrying a well garnished silver tray.

"You certainly don't intend to starve us," said Carol. "What pretty dishes—and what curious-looking glass!"

"Those are goblets and dishes from St. Pierre, *mademoiselle,*" said Jean Baptiste. "They were partly melted in the great heat during the eruption of Pelée, and are considered as *objets de vertu*."

"Looks like Venetian glass," I said. "Some of the silver is partly molten, too."

"It all came from the house of Mme. Saint Cyr," said Jean Baptiste. "That was destroyed, with the entire estate of her family, who were very rich and elegant, and—"

He checked himself suddenly, as if fearing he had said too much.

"Were you in their service?" I asked.

"My family has been in the Saint Cyr service since the French occupancy of this island, *monsieur*," he answered with an air of pride. "I myself had the honor to be during ten years the orderly of M. le Général Saint Cyr, father of *madame*. My own father, who was killed in the Allied advance on Peking, was *monsieur le général's* orderly before me."

"An honorable record," I said. "And what are you doing here?"

"I have been assigned by *madame* to the service of *monsieur le comte*," said he. "*Madame* was obliged to dispense with her personnel after being completely ruined by the volcano; but I am still her servant just the same," he added quickly, "though paid my wages by *monsieur le comte*."

Carol looked at me thoughtfully.

"All this sounds pretty fine to me, Brambles. Doesn't seem to match up with what they've done to us, does it?"

I shook my head.

"We'll know the answer sooner or later," I told her.

"I can't dope it out," said Carol. "They seem to be proud, aristocratic people. I wonder how dad got in so wrong!"

She was silent and pensive while Jean Baptiste removed the silver covers from the beautiful table service. He opened a bottle of champagne—a 1911 Moët & Chandon—and filled the curiously opaque distorted glasses. It was evident enough that Señor de Gonza was doing us the best he could. We had a *petite marmite* soup, followed by baked red snapper, then a *vol-au-vent* of veal, then a cold lobster with lettuce salad and mayonnaise. Having served us, Jean Baptiste withdrew.

"If it weren't for dad, I could languish here in captivity for several days," said Carol. "Languish is right, Brambles!"

"Better lay off it," I said, "or we'll find ourselves parked out with a geographical separation, instead of a pine partition. I thought this morning that I was destined to get a pine partition in three dimensions!"

"*Madame*," said Carol, "is a holy terror. Is her daughter as pretty as she?"

I nodded.

"Plus youth. She's the loveliest girl I ever saw—bar one," I added hastily, for the danger signals were flying.

A little line drew itself down the middle of Carol's forehead.

"That 'bar one' limped a little, Brambles! Another *mauvais pas* like that, and I'll tell Mr. Bluebeard that he can go ahead and lock the old door!"

"I think Jasmine is Señor de Gonza's bonus for all this," I said.

Carol gave a little sniff.

"More likely to be her mother. That old bird is fifty-five, if he's a day, and *madame*, I should say, is crowding forty pretty close. 'Fraid they'll have to buy some more black hair dye. They must have emptied the bottle on our gold and chestnut beans!"

"Rather an ingenious idea," I observed. "If they had to jump us to another place, we shouldn't be noticed like this; whereas a white man and girl reported missing would start tongues wagging and leave a trail like a comet. I am pretty well known on Martinique, and in a place like this there's a wonderful system of grapevine telegraph."

XI

THUS chatting cheerfully, we finished our delicious supper. Carol perched on a big *fauteuil* of painted Cordovan leather, which looked as if it might have been the chair of a Spanish prelate. She made an incongruous if very charming tableau—that of a pretty native Martiniquaise sitting on one white-stockinged leg, schoolgirl fashion, with the other swinging back and forth, her frame that stately piece of furniture.

She caught the expression of admiring amusement in my eyes, and laughed.

"After all, Brambles, I'm as much dressed as I would be for a dance at home—more, in fact, because this Mother Hubbard has a back and a bit of sleeve to it, and it's higher in front, too. I never wore corsets, anyhow."

There came the familiar squeak of the door, and Jean Baptiste entered. Then, with a sort of apologetic cough, in strode Señor de Gonza.

"I trust you enjoyed your supper," he said politely.

"It was delicious," Carol answered. "Do you happen to have a cigarette?"

"What?" exclaimed the count. "You do not smoke at your age, I hope!"

He looked appealingly at me.

"Suppose we make it a nicotine holiday, too, Carol," I suggested. "Let's call it a cure."

"Oh, very well!" she answered. "Hope we don't get the drug habit, though!" She glanced up impudently at the count, and I could see the disapproving admiration in his eyes. "I'll bet you've come to lock that door, and you're trying to buck up your nerve to do it!"

"Thank you for making it easier," said he. "I feel it to be my duty."

Jean Baptiste interrupted, with the privilege of an old servant in a Latin American family.

"Why not leave the door open, and let my sister sleep on a couch in *mademoiselle's* room?" he suggested. "My sister Camille is a very serious woman, I assure you, almost a *religieuse*."

"The devil fly away with your sister!" exploded the count. "The question of a *bonne* has been discussed and dismissed as too risky. They get attached to the one they are serving, and sorry for her, and then the first thing you know they let the cat out of the bag. No—we can afford to take no chances."

It was dark by this time, and the insect orchestra had started.

"You can go and get your sister," said the count, "and she can take *mademoiselle* for a little walk, if she will promise not to try to escape." He looked at Carol. "Will you give me your word of honor?"

She nodded.

"Oui, cher ogre!"

This was an unkind cut, for the old chap looked very much like an ogre when he tried to be severe. He did not seem offended, however.

"And you, *monsieur?*" he said, turning to me. "If you care to stroll about with me, I shall accept your word."

I hesitated. It was my intention to make a vigorous effort to escape that night, either by attacking the bars or the door, or by breaking a hole in the cement floor and tunneling. Carol would have to do most of the work, but it seemed to me that my arms were beginning to come to life again, and we had that rack of knives. It had occurred to me that, by nicking the edge of one weapon with another, a saw might be improvised of the finely tempered steel to cut through the window bars, which, no doubt, were of soft, malleable iron.

"Go ahead, Brambles!" said Carol. "The fresh air will do us good. This place reeks of booze. I've got used to it now, but I think it 'll cure me of the rummy habit."

So I gave my word—with all intention of keeping it, of course, because I would not have bolted without Carol in any case. I slipped on the drill blouse lying at the foot of the couch, and we were on the point of stepping out when there came the sound of a rapidly approaching motor.

De Gonza and Jean Baptiste exchanged a swift glance of understanding. They looked a little alarmed, I thought, but not surprised. Then they went out, closing the iron door behind them.

Carol looked at me with shining eyes.

"What now, Brambles?"

"Don't know," I answered, "but I can make a good guess—orders to shift us to some other place."

"Oh, dear—just when I was beginning to get a homy feeling! But I can stand it, I guess, as long as they don't try to separate us." She slipped suddenly out of the big chair and padded over to where I sat. "Do you know, Brambles, that I'm very much afraid that I've conquered one habit only to acquire a more gripping one? That's the *you* habit!"

Her arms went around my neck, and she laid her cheek on my head.

"You broke me of the others, my dear, but if you break me of this one, you'll break my heart at the same time!"

I suddenly discovered that Jean Baptiste was right about my arms. The left one went up automatically and encircled her waist. Then I thought of Mr. Grosvenor, who had intrusted me with the care of his daughter, and who was now hovering between life and death. I let my arm drop.

At that moment the rusty hinges of the door let out a screech, and in burst the count.

"Come!" said he. "There is no time to lose!"

"Come where?" demanded Carol.

"You will learn that in good time. It is the fault of this young man and makes us all a lot of trouble."

Carol straightened up.

"Do we go together?"

" Yes, and you have nothing to fear. You may be exposed to some slight hardship, ill befitting the daughter of a millionaire "—he loved to mouth that word—" but there is no help for it. We shall do our best. Now will you both promise me not to try to escape, or to cry out? Or shall I have to bind and gag you?"

" We promise," I said.

There was really no sense in being made uncomfortable.

" Then come along," said he, and led the way to the car.

I might have made a dash for it if I had wanted to, but even without my pledged word to hinder I would not have done so. I was beginning to believe that Mme. Saint Cyr had told me the truth in saying that the last thing Mr. Grosvenor would desire was that this affair should get publicity.

We got into the car. Jean Baptiste came out with a valise that must have been already packed for the emergency. In the driver's seat was the same chauffeur who had been tinkering with the magneto the day before. Jean Baptiste got up beside him, and the count with us, myself in the middle.

" Go ahead!" he growled.

We started off through the fresh, sweet-smelling night, with the moon invisible behind a high hill, but sending its bright rays upward to announce its advent. The road—a pretty bad one—pitched down windingly along the edge of the mountain. In places one caught a glimpse of the silvered sea, deep indigo where not splashed by moonlight. On Martinique colors endure throughout such a bright night as this—deep, wonderful tones, even to the reds and yellows, while the vivid green is of a substance that one looks profoundly into, as into the finest and most flawless cloisonné.

We passed a file of peasant women coming up from the town of St. Pierre to their little huts among the hills, and they gave us a cheerful *bon soir*. The robes of some of them, and their bandannas, crimson in the daytime, were of a deep shade of orange.

Then the moon burst out in all its splendor over the crest of Morne Rouge. A shower moved past us down the valley, and a moment later we witnessed that most beautiful of sights, a lunar rainbow. Skirts of filmy mist trailed off behind the shower, bringing a swift if gradual transition, like the development of a pellucid film or the illumination of a *mise en scène* behind a gauze curtain, to delight the audience with a set of unsuspected beauty.

Through the dissolving vapor we could see plushy slopes and plateaus that rose as they receded into a broken range of dream mountains. There might have been umbrageous giants reaching out from the somber cumuli that rested on those nebulous peaks, or a gilded galleon, with Nereids lounging voluptuously beside her prow as she surged shoreward from the pulsing sea. Nothing could have struck me as out of order, if it were astonishing enough.

I understood why early voyagers had a weakness for sketching wonders on their charts. They were trying to depict the possibility of prodigies too subtle for their powers of expression. They lacked the words to tell of their impressions and the skill to paint them, and so, having plenty of waste space on the chart, they threw in mermaids and dolphins and sea serpents.

Here was again the passion that I have already mentioned, but softened and sweetened by the glamour of the night. It was asking too much of human nature to require that it should be restrained in such an atmosphere. I could understand better the dances I had seen, and the feelings that impelled the girls to drift, at times, entirely away from their partners' arms, and to circle the room quite alone, with gliding steps and dreamy eyes and rhythmically waving hands, until, as if by some fortuitous meeting, they found themselves encircled again in the embrace they had seemed for a while to forget.

It was this rapt and solitary drifting that redeemed the dance from features unpleasantly raw to a person unaccustomed, as I was, to that sort of thing. It tempered the passion with poetry; and as such it was an exponent of Martinique, an island whose vivid sensuousness is fairly drenched in poetry and music and even religion.

Suddenly the car slowed and stopped. Between the big banana leaves I could see the flicker of a light. Jean Baptiste leaped down and dived into the exaggerated foliage like a frog diving into lily pads. I was able to make out the roof of what seemed scarcely more than a wattle hut. It struck me that if we were to be incarcerated in it, I could make a pretty good bluff at walking down the slope with the shack on my shoulders.

" Do we get out, dear Count de Gonza?" Carol asked.

She was holding tightly to my hand, and I could guess her suspense at the prospect that we might be separated.

" No, *mademoiselle*. We have stopped to get you a maid and a manservant. Both will be necessary in the place to which you are going. They are very worthy people, the son and daughter-in-law of Jean Baptiste. They ought to be all ready," he added grumblingly.

Apparently they were, for the *brigadier* came back, followed by a youthful edition of himself—a wiry young man of about twenty-five—and a young woman with a strong, supple figure. The man was carrying a bulky valise, which he quickly attached to the running board. Jean Baptiste let down the two folding seats, and the couple got in, to sit facing us.

" My son Hercule, *monsieur, mademoiselle,*" said the *brigadier;* " and his wife, Pensée."

They murmured their respectful salutations, looking at us, however, with a good deal of astonishment. Hercule had his father's warrior face. Pensée was a typical young hill woman of Martinique, sinuous and full of grace, yet quite able to swing up the slope from St. Pierre with a bushel basket of yams nicely poised on her swaying head.

It is this custom of carrying burdens, and heavy ones, for long distances in such fashion that gives the women their beautifully erect carriage. They march along with the bosom thrown out, the torso moving straight and evenly, and the swing of locomotion confined to the hips, as if they had a universal joint set in the waist. I had met files of them in the early morning, coming into Fort de France to the open market, with their produce thus borne along—great pyramids of coconuts or breadfruit, with the peak wabbling but never falling over. They make an admirable picture with their flashing, multicolored gowns, their gay kerchiefs, and their bare, round legs, resembling in strength and contour those of a Russian dancer.

Presently we slowed and stopped again, opposite a grove of lime trees, and so near the shore that we could hear the wavelets lapping on the beach.

" It is here that we descend," said the count, and we all got out.

There was a curious prinkling in my arms, and the surface wounds were beginning to itch. I felt that old Jean Baptiste was right, and that my arms were waking up again.

Hercule slipped into the lime grove and disappeared in the black shadows. Pensée hoisted the valise upon her shapely head, and, with the *brigadier* leading the way, we filed between the little trees and came out presently upon a beach of fine, black sand. A wherry was drawn up clear of the tide—no great haul, for there is only about eighteen inches or two feet of rise and fall in these waters.

The other men and Pensée now seized the gunwales of this sturdy tub, and slid her into the water, so that she floated clear. A little way out there was a good-sized sloop-rigged fishing boat lying at anchor. The breeze was offshore, so that it was quiet here under the lee of the land.

" Have we a long voyage ahead of us?" I asked the count.

" No, *monsieur,*" he answered. " It is not very far, and once clear of the land you are sure to catch a fair wind. You should arrive at your destination early to-morrow morning."

" Then you are not going with us?" Carol asked.

" Alas, no, *mademoiselle!* That might lead to suspicion in my regard; but I have made every arrangement for your comfort, and you could not be intrusted to the care of more faithful and competent servants than Jean Baptiste, Hercule, and Pensée." He seemed very nervous, and mopped his forehead. " And now I must request you to get aboard the boat. Do not be afraid. It is the season of good weather, and the boatmen are capable. Jean Baptiste and his son often go on fishing cruises, and sometimes to capture wild goats. Believe me, I would not send the daughter of a millionaire into any danger—and especially, if you will allow the compliment in spite of our peculiar and unfortunate relations, so charming a daughter."

He bowed. We returned his salute and got into the boat, Hercule picking Carol up easily in his strong arms and wading out with her. The two men got out their oars.

"*Bon voyage!*" called Señor de Gonza, and waved his hat.

Carol waved back to him.

" Not such a bad old pirate, Brambles," said she. " Where in the world do you suppose we are going?"

(*To be continued in the March number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

The Land

HOW JACK McFEE AND HIS LOLA MIGRATED FROM THE BOWERY TO A NEW WORLD

By Myron Brinig and Charles Paul

THE Bowery! Street of jangling Elevated trains so mercilessly noisy—trains that rush dizzily along to the City Hall or South Ferry—tense, rasping cars gorged with various fragments of the seven millions!

The Bowery! Knighthood is still in flower there. Those bleary-eyed, unshaven knights of the park bench still hold council within the decayed, tawdry halls that bear the legend:

BEDS, TWENTY-FIVE CENTS—
GENTS ONLY

The missions, the dives, the casual swinging doors of saloons that are no more—I have known them all. I knew the policeman on his beat with the tired eyes; the painted woman beckoning slyly from a darkened doorway; Sammy Lee, the laundryman, breezing as lightly as a yellow feather along the uneven pavement; the tightly buttoned cleric looking aggressively for lost souls; lost souls shivering ecstatically on the brink of reformation; that hefty sailor man reeling with a crazy hilarity out of Jack McFee's place—all these I have seen and known.

Jack McFee's place, which looked squeezed and terrified under the roaring of the Elevated trains, is no more. Jack McFee's place, sizzling in its own green gas glare, afoam with schooners of beer sailing merrily over the shiny counter, rendezvous of the men and women who were—Jack McFee's place has vanished. In its stead there is a soda fountain all shimmering nickel, imitation cherry wood, and reflecting mirrors.

Imperturbable Jack McFee, who presided over the Falstaffian schooners of beer, the small, angry-looking tumblers of whisky, the dancing rounds of brandy—where is Jack McFee? Where is Lola, Jack's woman, she of the tightly drawn black hair, whose lips were the color of red, red wine?

You remember Lola. She dwelt incongruously in the back room of Jack's place, an attractive, contented anachronism. Every one knew Lola. Even Sammy Lee, in his laundry, smoking his long bamboo pipe, smiled in his fashion when dark, mysterious Lola passed.

Ah, she was a lovely one! Busy clerks riding down to Wall Street on the Elevated used to get glimpses of her as she hurried along the Bowery. They thought of strumming guitars of old Spain, bubbling silver fountains under a southern moon, *señoritas* dancing to the click of castanets, until the guard warned them horribly:

"Wall!"

If Lola had known these far-away, romantic musings of clerks unknown to her, she would have laughed raucously. Yes, her laugh was a hideous thing. Why do so many women laugh so badly?

Lola would have laughed because her ideas of romance were so dissimilar to those of Wall Street clerks. Strumming guitars? Silver fountains? *Señoritas* dancing? They were all unknown to her. Lola, for all her warm southern beauty, was Bowery born and bred.

She had first seen the very wan light of a very rainy day in the shadow of this same grim iron structure upon which the trains roared and rumbled. Her mother had been—well—but her father was a Spanish sea captain, they do say. Lola herself used to aver that she often felt as if she had Spanish blood in her veins. Her reason for thinking so was an absurd one. She had a fondness for Spanish onions, boiled and served in vinegar.

Lola's parents disappeared shortly after she was born, so it doesn't make a great deal of difference who they were. Lola managed to get along. For a number of years she sold newspapers. Then, for a long time, she helped Sammy Lee wash and press and starch in his laundry—a perfectly amicable arrangement. They got along first-rate.

That is where Jack McFee first saw Lola, and her startling dark beauty disarranged his whole being. In those days Jack's laundry bills must have been extraordinarily high. The courtship was dim and elusive, the only spectator being a heathen Chinee. What he thought about it only the Great Joss knows.

Behind his shiny counter, Jack betrayed no sign of his inner feelings. However, his apron was spotlessly white, and his collars and cuffs looked as if they had been newly purchased from the store.

First thing we knew, Lola was installed in the back room, the most charming fixture in the place. Over our beer we used to hear her singing back there in her raucous voice. I, for one, preferred the Elevated; but when you're thirsty, nothing else matters much.

No one commented on her attractive presence when the door separating front and back hung ajar. That was Jack McFee's affair; but it is a fact that from the day when Lola became part of the place, the quality and quantity of intoxicating liquor that journeyed across the shiny bar mounted considerably.

The time came when I moved from the Bowery to a precinct that served as a more becoming frame to my better fortune; and when I returned to the old scene, eager to renew acquaintances and associations, I found that time, omnipotent sceneshifter, had erased the old Bowery. It was gone forever.

Jack McFee's place had a new name on the window—a colorless, punchless name that presided over sodas and confectionery. The owner of the new name had no idea of the whereabouts of Jack and his Lola. I went over to Sammy Lee's laundry, bent on further inquiry, but Sammy had also disappeared. To-day, perhaps, he is somewhere in China, a magistrate or capitalist. A Chinese laundryman doesn't always remain a laundryman.

At the Mission, just around the corner, I found a young university chap who was only too eager to tell me about Jack and Lola. Yes, of course he would tell me about them, and with pleasure, too! For it was a pleasure! His knowledge was second-hand, he hastened to inform me, but he had got the story from a reliable source.

Never mind the source. The story was the thing. I give it below as the young man gave it to me.

II

You see, prohibition changed the destinies of so many lives! Here was July 1, 1919, coming on relentlessly, yet to the casual habitué of Jack McFee's place the proprietor did not seem to manifest any great concern for the future; but that was not Jack McFee's way. He had always had the imperturbable mask that he wore with such success.

After closing hour, however, when the green gas had been dimmed to a single faint flicker, Jack returned to his Lola in the back room, his features wearing a frankly serious expression, as if he were greatly troubled about what was coming. The lovely girl whom he had kidnaped so deftly from Sammy Lee's laundry understood all too well. She was no fool!

"Jack, old boy, what's the use of worryin' your head off? Let it come an' be hanged! We won't starve. There's always somethin' to do," she consoled. "We're no cripples, Jack, what can't work. Cheer up, old boy!"

But Jack McFee, whose whole life had been spent in and around barrooms, wasn't so certain. The saloon was his life. Everything else was more or less unreal. Other means of livelihood were vague and uninspiring. Without the smell of beer in his nostrils, life would be a mockery.

"I'll find a way," he told Lola.

Every night, when the last customer had been ejected—the last customer always had to be ejected in those days—he came back to Lola with the same phrase on his lips:

"I'll find a way." It was a defiance, a ritual, a hope.

When you're as determined as all that to find a way, nothing on earth will stop you. That's a fine spirit for young America, of course, though in Jack McFee's case the ethics may have been questionable. Anyhow, he found the way.

You remember Dan Cassidy, the Bowery Czar? Every one in the precinct knew him for what he was—the best-hearted crook on the island. Dan is serving a pretty little sentence up the river now, and there's no earthly good in reviving old scandals; but Cassidy's and McFee's careers touch at a certain point. Dan's misfortune was Jack's fortune.

Dan Cassidy and Jack McFee knew and trusted each other. Shady politicians and barkeeps have much common ground. One night, after closing, Dan was invited into the back room for a bite and a glass of beer. It was nearing prohibition time, and McFee was becoming desperate.

Lola was especially nice to Cassidy that night. She prepared a tempting supper, and served Dan with her own hands. After the table had been cleared, it was she who broached a subject that might have been dangerous in less expert hands.

"Well, Dan, there's not many more of these feeds left," she began. "You'd better enjoy yourself!"

Jack McFee, at the other end of the table, waited expectantly.

"What a damned shame!" Cassidy exploded, filled with good food and beer. His whole heavy, solid frame was abusive with indignation. "Taking away a man's livelihood like that!"

"I'm always tellin' Jack not to worry about it," said Lola casually. "There's always work for those as are willin' to work. We'll get along somehow, I'm always tellin' him. Fill up your glass, Dan!"

"Damned shame!" repeated Cassidy, his indignation showing itself in red splotches on his heavy face. "What are all the saloon keepers goin' to do for a livin'? Where are they goin' to turn?"

"They've got to find some way," muttered McFee.

"Take yourself, Jack, for instance. What are you goin' to do after the first? You must have some plans."

"No plans, Dan."

"We got our health, Dan," reaffirmed Lola. "We got our health. Work's to be found. We'll look around, that's what."

"What kind of work?" asked Dan, trying to get at the kernel. "You can't just go out and do anything, y'know. Saloon keepers ain't fit for much else."

"That's just it," said McFee.

"An' there ain't no goin' against the law," Cassidy shrewdly remarked.

That left an opening.

"They'll be pretty strict, I suppose," remarked McFee.

"Won't be much chance to get around them," averred Cassidy. "Why, just this afternoon a fellow wanted me to go in with him. Goin' to make his own liquor. Asked me to sell it for him. Money in it, of course. 'Nix!' I tells him. I want to be sure of these things."

"You mean you couldn't trust this man?" Lola asked.

"No, couldn't trust him around the block."

"But suppose you found some one you could trust?" McFee put in, seizing his chance.

"Here, let me fill your glass, Dan," Lola insisted. "There's not many you can trust, huh, Dan?"

"Not many." Dan emptied another. "People like you, for instance. I know you, Jack. Wouldn't be afraid to trust you."

"I appreciate that, Dan," said McFee slowly.

"I trust you, Jack McFee, an' that's why I'm sorry for you—losing your business an' all. Hard lines! Wish I could help you."

"Maybe you can," McFee put in eagerly.

"Only be too glad, Jack—an old friend like you."

Dan Cassidy laid his hand on McFee's shoulder and pressed hard.

"I've been thinkin' about makin' my own liquor," McFee began cautiously.

"You have? Pretty dangerous," balked Cassidy.

"Not here in New York," explained McFee. "Somewhere in the country, on some small farm. No one would think of lookin' for booze there."

After this there was a pause, during which the future of Jack McFee and Lola hung in the balance. What would Dan Cassidy say?

"Not bad idea," he approved. "Never entered my head."

Jack and Lola regained their breaths.

"I could buy some small farm a good ways out, so's not to attract attention," Jack repeated, the whole plan gaining in confidence now that Cassidy had approved. "Lola, here, could help me."

"Surest thing in the world," agreed Lola, her dark eyes flashing with enthusiasm.

"Know anything about farming?" asked the practical Cassidy.

"No," admitted Lola; "but we could learn. Ain't there books that teach?"

"Farmin' ain't no puddin'," Cassidy told them with an air of wide learning. "But I guess you ain't goin' up there to farm. Well, children, go ahead. I'll 'tend to this end, see?"

"Thanks, Dan," was all McFee could say.

"Don't thank me yet," observed Cassidy, getting up from the table and making attitudes of departure. "First, produce. Here's success!"

He drank off the remainder of his beer in one amazing gulp. He shook McFee's hand, patted Lola's dark head, and was gone.

"I'll find a way," McFee had persuaded himself for many weeks; and now his silent, dogged determination had borne fruit.

That night he slept more easily than he had for a long while. With Dan Cassidy's strength behind him, his future looked more than hopeful.

The very next morning McFee departed for Albany and opened negotiations for a farm. Within a month he had come to terms with an up-State family who desired to live in the city.

Oh, yes, this eighteenth amendment changed the destinies of a good many lives! A morning came when Jack McFee's door no longer swung back and forth, and the saloon was draped mournfully in the pathetic silence of desertion. No more would the bleary-eyed knight of the park bench fumble desperately for a coin with which to quench his importunate thirst. Jack McFee was no longer to be seen behind the counter, unemotionally sliding brews across the shiny surface. Lola's voice no longer issued forth from the back room, in competition with the roaring trains overhead. John Barleycorn was dead, and the Bowery was stricken with a paralysis of grief.

As long as they could remember, the Bowery had been the beginning and the end of their daily lives. Dawn had meant the rattle of milk wagons over the cobblestones. The sound of jolting milk cans had been the signal for the city's reawakening, if indeed she ever slumbered. Then came the routine of the working day, an unceasing rumbling of monotonous activity, always the same, never changing. The nights held no stars for them, no moon floating unconcernedly through silver breakers of clouds.

Above it all sounded the continual roar of Elevated trains passing up and down, the raucous, feverish concordance of splashing crowds of humanity, the noisy movement of the city's life, rushing onward and onward in the same eternal groove.

III

Lola and Jack McFee arrived at their farm at a time of morning when the sun had but recently escaped its nocturnal prison. They were driven from the station by an old man who had been driving the bus thereabouts for a good many years. His name was Elmwood, and there was no concealing the fact that the coming of these two city dwellers marked an epoch in his life. If old Mr. Elmwood had known that he was driving a former Bowery bartender and a woman who had once worked in a Chinese laundry! Antiquated, rustic Mr. Elmwood, who drove a bus along narrow, rutted country roads, and who tended bees in his spare moments!

Lola and Jack watched the bus until it was swallowed suddenly away in a bend of the road—two strange figures weighed down by heavy suit cases. In front of them stood their new home; behind lay acres of sweet-smelling pasture land.

Land! How strange, how limitlessly strange! The new environment was whimsically out of touch with their feelings—their city, Bowery feelings.

On three sides the house was surrounded by growing things of the soil. To the south that standing army of the agricultural world, corn, stood at attention under the golden inspection of the sun. To the east the land was ruffled by a growth of various vegetables—potatoes, beets, parsley, onions, and beans. To the west were six or seven apple trees, the fruit still an undiscernible green among the leaves.

They remained in the middle of the road, a little dubious of their venture, perhaps, in these first moments of discovery. Yet the sun streaming down upon the land had a warm friendliness. In the Bowery the sun was cruel.

A robin welcomed them from one of the apple trees. He seemed to be trying to make himself heard above the insistent cricket calls, which came in rhythmical time. Lola looked down and saw a well-drilled corps of ants attacking the toe of her shoe with ridiculous assurance.

"Ain't it pretty?" she said at last.

"There ought to be quite a little money in this farm," ventured McFee. "You'd better get me something to eat. Wonder if there's a nice hiding place for my still!"

They went into the farmhouse, and were bewildered by the cool dimness of the three rooms. Evidently the former tenants had been of a cleanly and orderly disposition. The sitting room was fresh and clean, and smelled faintly of lavender. The bedroom had window curtains of lilac-patterned chintz and a heavy, old-fashioned four-poster bed. In the roomy kitchen the cooking utensils gleamed with a mirrorlike brilliance where they hung from nails driven into the wall.

A faint suspicion of having lived an imperfect sort of life entered Lola's mind.

"Gee, this is neat!" was her unrestrained comment. "Somehow I feel like cookin'!"

During their simple breakfast, McFee talked only of the still and their chances of success. After the meal, he departed in search of some hidden spot where he might make his own liquor safe from the prying eyes of the law.

Lola washed the dishes with an enthusiasm entirely spontaneous and unconscious; and she sang her discordant songs with a certain new reverence. She didn't quite know why she felt so happy. Was it the sunlight streaming in a solid wave of gold through the windows? Was it the unaccustomed freedom of space? The fresh air? Was it the robin singing with such strenuous abandon out in the garden?

"Golly, I feel queer!" she told herself, as she dried the last dish and placed it carefully away in the cupboard.

She went outdoors into the vegetable garden, and walked along the narrow paths, being careful not to trample on the growing plants. She stopped to bend over them, and stroked the greens in tender discovery. It was strange how things grew out of the earth like that! What made things grow? The sun? The rain? God?

Yes, it must be God. He created the soil. How sharp and warm it smelled! She began digging her long, white fingers into the soft, black loam. God created everything. He must be great!

Later in the afternoon she discovered a brook that ran along with a mirthful, transparent rapture. Somewhere, far, far away, she supposed, it became a river—the Hudson, perhaps.

She seated herself on a smoothly rounded stone and bathed her eyes in the swift, crystal current of the water. Brooks joined rivers, and rivers made the ocean. Some day, perhaps, Jack would take her across the ocean. Foreign countries — France—Spain! Her father had been a Spanish sea captain.

She knelt down, and the water ran cool against her hands. She felt inclined to take off her shoes and let the water lave her bare feet. She debated with herself. Jack wouldn't like her to do that. It would be silly.

She went on following the brook, filled with a sense of childish adventure. Farther on, it dropped ten feet or more into a rock-formed cavity. Lola was thrilled by the unexpected discovery. She clambered down by the side of the waterfall, and was amazed to find McFee there below.

"Hello, Jack!"

"Lola! What you doin' here?"

"Oh, nothin' much. What you doin'?"

"I'm goin' to fix my still here, back of the waterfall. No one would think of lookin' here."

She joined him where he stood, in a little rocky hollow formed by the concentrated effort of the pouring water that came down in front, an unbroken silver torrent.

"Ain't the water cool an' nice? Ain't you afraid that the place will cave in, Jack? Looks dangerous."

"Not much chance," answered McFee. "A heavy storm might do it, though I've my doubts."

"It's cool an' nice here!" exclaimed Lola, her dark eyes dancing.

"The hooch will be even cooler an' nicer," McFee winked back.

"Look, Jack! Look at the rainbow in the water! Did you ever see anything like that before? Ain't it pretty?"

"You go home, Lola. I can't work with you hangin' around. Ain't you got plenty of work to do around the house?"

"Aw, Jack! Mad?"

"Run along now! How do you ever expect me to get this still fixed up? How are we goin' to make any money admirin' the scenery?"

"All right, Jack! Good-by!"

She approached him and touched his sleeve wistfully. She felt as if she wanted to be kissed.

"Run along, Lola!"

She emerged from the little hollow into the outer sunlight, invaded by a strange melancholy. For a moment she wished she were back in the Bowery, hearing the crash of the Elevated trains.

By the time she had returned to the

house her depression had lifted, and she looked forward to supper with an eager impatience. The work taxed all her strength, but she found a singular and original enjoyment in being so taxed. She had done very little cooking in the back room of Jack's old place. Supper there had usually been a matter of running across the street to the delicatessen store.

That it was a surprisingly good supper she prepared was evidenced by McFee's high humor, and by his willingness to eat everything she placed before him. When he had finished, he even wanted to help Lola with the dishes.

"Catch me lettin' you help!" she exclaimed, pushing him away. "You just set down in that rocker an' smoke a cigarette. How's the still comin' on?"

"Pretty fair, Lola." He opened the door that looked out on the road, with the pasture land beyond, and moved his chair closer to the threshold. "Think I'll get a pipe, Lola."

"You sure are gettin' to be a farmer!" she trifled.

"Gee, it's quiet! Come here, Lola. Look at the sky!"

She came over by the side of his chair.

"Say, it looks like a fire, don't it, Jack?"

"Maybe it's only the sun," he answered.

"Jack, did you ever see the sun that red?"

"Must be a fire. No—there'd be smoke, if it was. Guess it's the sun, all right."

By the time she had put the dishes away, the crimson curtain stretched along the horizon had melted and cooled into a hazy, purple twilight. There was the far-off cry of a whippoorwill, and the crickets shrilled their monotonous note.

"Come on, Lola. Sit down by me. What d'you suppose those noises are?"

"Some kind of birds, don't you think, Jack? Don't it make you feel funny, bein' out here a million miles from nowhere? Don't it make you feel funny, Jack?"

"Sure! I feel as if I ought to be back behind the bar, servin' drinks. Funny, us two bein' here. Wonder when Cassidy's comin' down! I ought to have my still fixed up by to-morrow."

"Ain't it quiet, Jack? Don't it make you feel kind o' scared? There don't seem to be any people livin' around here. Maybe we ought to get a dog, huh?"

"Wouldn't be such a bad idea," agreed McFee.

"Look at the stars, would you, Jack? Did you ever see that many to once?"

"I wonder how many there are up there!" he speculated idly.

"Millions an' billions of them, huh, Jack? My, ain't they thick?"

"Wish I had a dollar for every one of them, Lola! I don't think Morgan would be any richer than me. Huh, what do you think about it, kid? Give us a kiss, Lola—come on!"

"There, you greedy! Are you satisfied? Um-m-m! Ain't the smell wonderful? Little bit different from smellin' gas an' dead cats in New York, I'll say!"

"I s'pose so. Wonder what's happenin' in New York to-night! Just wait till Cassidy begins sellin' our booze, Lola. We'll be able to take a few trips to the city, and we'll stay at the Ritz. Swell place, the Ritz!"

"An' the money we'll make off the vegetables an' corn an' apples, Jack! Ain't the apple trees pretty?"

"Wonder when Cassidy is comin' down!"

"Oh, look, Jack—a star fallin' down! Whoo-pee! Looks like a Bronx express makin' up for lost time! Why do stars fall, anyway?"

"Ask me somethin' sensible, will you? Why do stars fall? How the hell should I know?"

"Maybe it's God what does it," said Lola.

"Maybe."

"I guess it must be Him, Jack. Say, Jack, d'you ever think of Him?"

"Lola, since when did you join the Salvation Army?"

"But do you, Jack? I'm askin' you! Do you ever think of God? That's a sensible question, ain't it?"

"Sure, it's sensible. I think of God—sometimes."

"I thought of Him this afternoon, Jack. Funny the way I did, too. I was walkin' along, lookin' at the spuds growin' out there. 'Gee,' I says to myself, 'what makes spuds grow? What makes anything grow? Little babies, now.' Wouldn't you like to have a little baby, Jack?"

"Aw, cut out the religion, will you?"

"That's a sensible question. Wouldn't you, Jack?"

"Sure I would. Any man would—any married man."

"Aw, Jack!"

"We'd better turn in," he said abruptly.

"Got plenty of work ahead of us to-morrow. Maybe Cassidy will be down."

IV

NEXT morning Lola awoke in a maze of complications. What was wrong? She hadn't heard the milk wagons rattling over the cobblestones. Instead, she heard a vague, various twittering.

She lay with her eyes wide open, gazing at the whitewashed ceiling. Since when had their ceiling been so white? And what was that strangely pleasant smell? Slowly comprehension came. Of course, she was in the country! Birds, the smell of lavender and clover, and soft, warm earth!

She got out of bed, being careful not to waken McFee, and unconsciously humming the refrain of an old song:

"East Side, West Side, all around the town.

"'The Sidewalks of New York'—gee, that don't fit in very well here!" she murmured to herself.

She entered the kitchen with the first rays of the rising sun, and started to prepare breakfast.

Presently McFee came in, to find everything in readiness. On the table, breakfast waited, hot and tempting. There were flowers in a bowl—gayly colored wild blooms.

"My, you're an early bird!" he approved. "Where did all the flowers come from?"

"Ain't they pretty, Jack? There are thousands of 'em around here. Thicker 'n thieves they are. I'll show you the places where they grow."

"I ain't got time to pick flowers," he grumbled.

"It won't take more than a few minutes, Jack. Aw, Jack!"

There was a new and tantalizing freshness about Lola that he couldn't resist. During the last twenty-four hours her strange, exotic beauty had attained a new softness, a new charm, which surprised the man who thought that he knew her. Why, she was a woman incomparable, sweetly fragrant as a rose!

"Lola!" he called.

"Come on, Jack!"

She took his hand and led him through the cornfield to a place where the land sloped abruptly upward. They climbed knee-deep through long, thickly growing grass, starred with yellow buttercups, brown hawkweeds, and white daisies. The tiny, gleaming pools of dew wet their shoes and seeped in until they felt their feet damp.

Lola chattered like a child. From time to time she stooped to pluck a flower that she held under Jack's nose.

"I ain't never seen you act this way," he remarked.

"Never had the chance," she answered, out of breath. "Here we are! Here's the top. Ain't it pretty?"

The view had enough beauty and color and perfume to stir the man's blood. He caught Lola under the elbows and pulled her with a swift motion to his breast, kissing her lips.

Then came the reaction. He drew back, the color flooding his face.

"We're just two crazy kids!" he said gruffly.

Lola covered her eyes with her hands and stood perfectly still.

"What's the matter, kid?"

"N-nothin'."

"You ain't cryin'?"

She shook her head.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said, snatching her hands away and seeing the tears.

"Jack, remember last night, when we talked about God?"

"Well?"

"An' I said somethin'—about babies?"

"Lola! It ain't—" He saw her nod, and patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Nix on the tears! We'll go into town next week an' see a preacher."

"Jack! Jack!"

"Here we are wastin' the morning. I'm goin' to fix up that still before night. Are you comin'?"

They went back to the house.

V

A WEEK passed, and Jack McFee had no word from Cassidy. Then, unexpectedly, disaster loomed up in the columns of a New York newspaper delivered by the bus. Dan Cassidy had become involved in a bootlegging scandal, and was in jail, awaiting trial.

"That finishes us!" groaned McFee. "After everything is fixed, too! What's the good of the liquor without Cassidy? He knew the ropes."

"Never mind—we got the farm," consoled Lola.

"After I've gone to all the trouble an' expense of makin' hooch? Lola, are you crazy?" Then another thought occurred to him. "Say, supposin' Cassidy squealed on us? Suppose he tells what we came down here for?"

"He wouldn't do that," answered Lola.

Nevertheless, her face wore an anxious expression.

"If he squealed, we might land a term in prison," McFee concluded nervously. "That would be a fine end, huh?"

Prison! For some strange reason, the ominous word had no depressing effect upon Lola. She turned the thought over vaguely in her mind for several moments. It somehow linked itself with the song of the robin out there in the apple tree. Sing! Sing! Lift your song to the sky a million blue miles above you!

"Jack," she said, "we've been in prison all our lives."

"What are you talkin' about, anyway?" remonstrated McFee. "Seems to me you've been a little bit funny in the head ever since we left New York!"

"I guess it's because I've felt happier than I used to feel, cooped up in the back room of that saloon," answered Lola, looking out of the window, her eyes lit by a high ecstasy.

"What's the reason, I'd like to know?" angrily demanded McFee. "It ain't as if we had a future ahead of us. Now that Cassidy's been nipped, a fine time we'll have of it!"

"Aw, cut out your mopin', Jack. Tune up your fiddle. Let's go out an' give the vegetables the once-over. Do us good."

She took his hand. Reluctantly he followed. Great black clouds that looked like islands in a gray sea had piled themselves into the sky. A cool breeze laughed wistfully in their ears and blew their garments into strange, whimsical shapes.

"Oh, the nice, cool wind! Makes me feel clean!" cried Lola. "That parsley is about ready to pick. Smells different from the kind you buy in stores."

"The ground's dry. The rain will come in handy," observed McFee. "Heat never lasts, I guess. Weather's bound to change. Just like a man. He's different from one day to the next. Is that a bug on that radish leaf?"

They stooped over the plant.

"Dog-gone shame!" deplored Lola. "It's eating into the plant. They kill vegetables, these bugs. Ugh! Whisk it off, Jack! We'll have to pay more attention to this farm."

"Ain't it funny?" mused Jack. "Did you ever notice how so much in this world is the same? Flowers and plants have enemies, just like men. We fill ourselves with liquor, and after a while it begins to eat into our hearts. I never used to admit that to anybody. After all, I made my livin' out of sellin' booze; but between me an' you, kid, a glass of whisky is just as bad for a man as a bug is for a radish—or am I spielin' a lot o' guff? Huh, Lola?"

"Oh, I don't know. We're always learnin'. People who live in cities all their lives don't know a whole lot of things. This farm may be a mighty good thing for us."

"Sure, I don't deny it. A man shouldn't spend his whole life in a dirty, dusty city, where there's no fresh air. I don't deny it. This is goin' to be an education for me an' you. Hey, Lola, you're steppin' on a beet plant!" He gripped her firmly by the shoulders and set her feet in the path. "How would you like some one to step on you like that?"

"Oh, Jack, you're strong! The fresh air is goin' to build you up like anything. You won't need much hired help, you're gettin' so spry. Oh, here are the green onions! Did you ever notice, Jack, how pretty green onions are? I used to think that all a green onion did was smell."

"Good for the blood," McFee said, with an air of learning.

"That's what they say. We're sure some farmers!" laughed Lola.

"We don't know anything," said McFee abruptly. "We'll have to learn lots to make a success out of this thing. We ought to study up."

"I've heard of schools for farmers," suggested Lola.

"Agricultural schools, you mean. There's one in this State, I guess. Wouldn't be a bad idea for me to look into that. I'm kind o' old, though."

"Go on, Jack—you're only twenty-nine! You could go to school, and I'd take care of this place with a couple o' hired men."

"Say, you're a brave little girl! I didn't think it was in you, Lola. Naw, that's straight goods. I'm goin' to find out about one of these schools—when I get this still off my mind. Say, it's rainin'! We'll get soaked!"

A storm had broken suddenly. All along the limitless sky the clouds knocked against one another in violent blasts, and flashes of lightning made the world blaze momentarily with white fire. The two discoverers of the land hurried back to the shelter of their house, while the rain fell upon them in swift long lines the color of cold steel.

They reached their door soaked to their skins, and breathless with laughter, like children who have had a good time and are not sorry. Inside, McFee began to stir up the dying embers in the stove, while Lola donned her apron and rummaged the pantry for the evening food.

Outside, the scolding wind spanked the rain against the window panes until they dazzled with a fresh, diamantine glitter. The noise of thunder continued. The rain fell with increased force and volume on the roof, against the windows, on the soil. For miles around it fell, steadily, relentlessly, overwhelmingly.

"Quite a storm!" McFee acknowledged. "Bad enough to cause damage!"

They had seated themselves at their supper when the creak and splashy clatter of the station bus could be heard approaching out of the storm. Presently they heard the horses stop in front of the house. There were loud voices that carried from the road confusedly.

"Who can it be?" Lola asked, with fear in her eyes.

"Do you think—" McFee began. "Keep cool, Lola!"

VI

THERE was a knock on the door, and McFee rose unsteadily to answer. He placed his hand on the knob and pulled slowly, until two authoritative-looking men dressed in waterproofs were disclosed. The rain caused their oily black coats to glisten sharply, and the wind almost blew them into the room.

"John McFee?" asked one of the men.

Jack nodded with a swift realization of despair. "We've got orders to search your place—you know what for. Where do you keep it, McFee?"

Lola stood by the side of the table, with muscles that might have been starched. Dan Cassidy had squealed! Schools and prisons and the child she was to bear—all these things—

"What did you say, men?" she asked with extraordinary calm.

"You heard us. Where's the hooch? You know what that word means, I guess!"

"Why, there must be some mistake," McFee replied in a hollow voice.

"Our business is farming," said Lola.

"Is that a bedroom in there?" asked one of the men, ignoring McFee and Lola.

Without waiting for an answer, they set to work, methodically ransacking every nook and corner of the house.

"Nothing here," they concluded. "We'll have to look around the farm. Come on, now! Get a move on!"

McFee donned a slicker and boots, and led the men out into the rain, which still fell heavily. Lola heard them tramping off. She sat with her elbows on the table, following them in her mind.

Would Jack take the officers to the waterfall? What would become of them? Was it New York once more, and the dreary, racking procedure of a trial? Was it prison? Would it be necessary to give up the farm, just as they had begun making plans, dreaming dreams?

This newly discovered freedom, then, was something they would never possess. They were doomed!

The room darkened. The raindrops coursing down the window laughed and mocked with glittering disdain the dim, blue shadows within.

The thunder grumbled vaguely now, but the rain still fell in steel-blue lines, cooling the meadows and hills, assisting all of nature's growth to a greener, fuller maturity. In the morning the trees and the wild flowers would hold little pools of shimmering dew on their green lips. There would be a renewed perfume after the rain. The robin would sing more sweetly, and the insects would creep out of the earth to warm themselves casually in the sun; but she and Jack would be on their way to New York, with handcuffs on their wrists, and flanked on either side by officers.

She thought of McFee's desire to go to an agricultural college. That would come to nothing. He might be sent to prison, instead. Their marriage would never occur; their baby would come to them without a name.

Why didn't the officers return? Surely they knew enough to look under a waterfall. Why had Jack chosen such a place? They would look there first of all.

City born and bred, accustomed to the city's ways, they should have remained on the Bowery. No one would have bothered to investigate them there.

The corn—the hill beyond, burning gold with buttercups—the brook, tripping deliciously over the rounded stones, white as quartz—the waterfall, rushing over the miniature precipice with a quick, silver relief, catching on its glassy bosom the rays of the sun, becoming in its descent a rainbow fallen from the sky, a many-colored Ferris wheel in mid air—all these visions and sensations!

Lola closed her eyes and found that she could pray.

VII

AND thus McFee found her on his return—found her tense and still as a statue. He stood by the door, watching her, for many minutes, while the sound of the falling rain drowned out his heavy breathing, perilously near sobs.

At last she opened her eyes and saw him standing there.

"Jack!"

The man was no longer able to control himself. His features jerked and twisted, and betrayed the emotion that racked him through and through. He stumbled over to the place where she sat, sank on his knees at her feet, and buried his head in her lap. His intense feeling communicated itself to her, and the tears started up in her eyes.

"It's all right, kid—all right! They've gone!"

"I prayed that they'd go, Jack! I prayed!"

"That's good! That's great! They've gone! They didn't find a thing!"

"Did they look under—"

McFee raised his head, and his wet eyes pierced the darkness with a startling ecstasy of brilliance.

"They couldn't look there, kid — they couldn't! The whole place has caved in, just as if I'd ordered it. The still's all covered with rocks and soil. The storm—"

"You mean that hollow place under the waterfall, Jack? Isn't it there any more?"

"No! I could hardly believe my eyes. Come along, Lola, and look. Gawd!"

He started toward the door in a burst of delirious enthusiasm; but he was laboring under too great a strain to think or do anything consecutively. He wandered back to Lola, knelt at her feet, and kissed her hands.

"We're saved!" he cried. "They can't get us now. We'll run the farm. No more stills! I'll go to the agricultural school—I will, by Gawd! To-morrow we'll go to Albany and be married. No, to-night! Get ready! The rain is letting up. Open the window, Lola! The air, the land, the land! Let them in! Let in the wind and the stars! I wanted them all my life, and didn't know it! What a fool!"

"Hush, Jack! Don't run on this way. It's all over now. They're gone, Jack. Don't cry. I'm gettin' ready. Can't you see me gettin' ready? We'll be married to-night!"

"There's nothing they can find, even if they do come back—damn them! There's nothing they can get on us. From now on we're farmers. Come on, kid — ready? We'll walk to the station in time to catch the evening train. I want to feel the rain in my eyes, the cool rain. Gee, I'm a baby! Can't help it, though, can I, Lola? Can't help feeling happy, can I? Ready, Lola? Ready?"

"I'm ready, Jack. Hush—don't carry on so! Got enough money for the fare? Here, wait till I lock the door. Wait for me, Jack! Gee, look at the stars comin' out! Billions of 'em! Smell the wild roses, Jack? They're wild roses, the kind that cost so much in the city. They grow everywhere around here, and they're free—free!"

THE MASTERPIECE

SOUL of mine—my body, too—
When the Lord God fashioned you—
Fashioned you so fine and fair,
Eyes and heart and hands and hair—
  What a happy God was he!
Happy as an artist is
  When he lays his tools aside,
Proudly thinking: "I made this—
  Made this beauty to abide!"
Yet he gives his masterpiece—
  Is it true?—oh, love, to me!

Richard Leigh

Dross

THE BABBITT FURNACE AT ZEIGLER'S SOLVES A PROBLEM FOR PETE ERICKSON'S WIFE

By Tom Shiras

THE perspiration rolled in large beads from Lillie Erickson's brow as she prepared the noonday meal. She was in a sullen mood, and a defiant light glittered in her brown eyes. She was a slave to Pete Erickson, not a wife. There wasn't another woman in Ruddellsville who had to live under the humiliating conditions to which she was subjected.

It seemed to the angry woman that Pete was not a man, but a hybrid. When he spoke to her, he grunted like a hog. If she showed the least sign of rebellion, he bellowed like a mad ox. His hands and face were always grimy, his overalls were always black and greasy. He wouldn't sit down and talk to her as a husband should. He wouldn't take her to dances, or to the movies, or even to church.

On Sunday he would sit out in the woodshed all day, puttering over his toy furnace. He was penurious, and doled out money for household expenses in pennies, grudgingly. He would not buy decent clothes for Lillie, and they lived in a shack near the depot that he rented for five dollars a month.

She turned from the rickety cupboard toward the table, carrying a handful of dishes. She stumbled over little Pete, who was playing on the floor with clinkers from the stove, and a plate went flying through the air and crashed against the open oven door.

Setting the rest of the dishes on the table, Lillie grabbed the child by the neck, shook him, and threw him out through the back door. The dirty little brat—Pete's brat, always dirty like his father, always prying, sober-eyed, into things to find out what they were made of, never talking, but always getting hurt and squalling!

Trembling with nervousness, she looked around at the soiled, frayed wall paper, the soot-filled lace curtains, the carpetless floor, and the cheap, shabby furniture.

"Lord, what a hole, and what a life!" she muttered disdainfully.

The noon whistle at the stave mill stirred the heat-laden July atmosphere with a deep-toned, violent blast. A few minutes later she heard footsteps on the dirt path leading to the front door, and a wan smile lighted her face as Wilbur Sharp ran up the steps.

Last January, Wilbur had walked up the same steps fagged and half starved, and Pete had taken him in. She had protested then, because it would add to her household work, but it was different now.

Pete got work for Wilbur at the babbitt furnace at Zeigler's, and the seven dollars a week that he paid for his board practically covered the household expenses. To Pete, Wilbur's coming had been a financial windfall; to Lillie, an epoch in her sordid life.

Wilbur was from Little Rock, the capital of the State. After a few weeks of the plain but substantial fare served at Pete Erickson's board, he began to wax sleek and fat, and to assume a grandiose air of superiority.

He had a fetching way of tying his scarf, he wore his soiled gray fedora at a rakish angle, and he smoked his cigarettes in one side of his mouth—all of which had its effect on Lillie, and on the younger set of both sexes in the village. He was quite a blade about town until Ed Campbell licked him for insulting his sister, and the crowd of young bloods who shot craps at the big spring on the banks of Pearl River, on Sunday afternoons, caught him using loaded dice.

Lillie resented Wilbur Sharp's popularity. She considered that he belonged to her because she had rescued him from the flotsam. When the young men of the village scorned his company, when the girls turned their faces away as he passed them on the street, and when the older folk spoke of him as a contemptible cur, she was glad. She felt that she could assert her authority over him now.

When Wilbur entered the kitchen, he smiled at her, tossed his cap in a corner, and stuck out his dissipated face. She playfully slapped his cheek.

"Lemme alone now, Wilbur! Don't you plague me. Your dinner's ready, and I want to get it on the table."

He didn't heed her words. The smile on his face changed into a look of gloating carnality, and he caught her in his arms.

"Kiddo, I love you! You're going with me out of this hell hole. I've got a secret that will put silk dresses on your back and diamonds on your fingers. I'll make a queen out o' you! We'll leave the dirty-faced, squalling brat with Pete. Good joke on Pete! He don't love you. He makes a hundred and fifty simoleons a month, and lets you live like a sow. I'll give you fifty beans to get yourself some glad rags with, and at three o'clock this afternoon we'll blow for Little Rock. I know a bird with a car I can trust, and you can wear a veil. What you say, kiddo?"

His arms tightened about her, and enticing dreams filled her mind. Pete and she had spent the two days of their honeymoon in Little Rock. He had refused to stay longer, on account of the expense.

Ease, clothes, jewels, and pleasure swam before Lillie's eyes. It was true that Pete was pulling down a hundred and fifty dollars a month, and that she was living like a sow in a sty.

"All right!" she breathed in a whisper.

Wilbur sat down at the table and gulped his food nervously. When he completed his meal, he went to his room and changed his clothes. She continued her work as if in a trance. He came out, thrust fifty dollars in currency into her hand, caught her in his arms again, and kissed her. Then he started to the Zeigler plant, to relieve Pete at the furnace.

II

A FEW minutes after Wilbur's departure, Lillie was brought out of her mental aberration by a series of shrill screams and a blood-curdling yell. The screams came from Lena Lackey's three-year-old chit, who lived across the street, and the yell from her own offspring. She dashed to the door and took in the situation at a glance. The children had been quarreling, and Lena was endeavoring to shake the lungs out of little Pete.

She hated Lena Lackey. Lena was always blabbing things, and had started back-door gossip about Lillie and Wilbur. When she saw her shaking little Pete, hot blood surged into her veins, and she darted into the street in a paroxysm of rage.

Grabbing her young hopeful, she gave Lena a vicious shove that sent her staggering, and followed her with blazing eyes, deluging her with a tirade of abuse. Lena retreated backward, step by step, toward her front gate, hurling Lillie's words back into her face.

John Lackey, Lena's husband, drawn from the house by the uproar, saw his wife retreating. Cursing profusely, he ran to her assistance.

Lillie could cope with her own sex, but when John caught her by the arm and shook her roughly, panic seized her, and she vainly endeavored to break loose. Suddenly he released her, and stood staring at something behind her. Lena and the two children were also staring in the same direction.

Lillie wheeled around, and there was Pete, right behind her, advancing to the fray. His big face was red with anger, and his gray eyes flashed like glittering dagger points. John Lackey put his hands up, as if to fight; but Pete walked right through his defense, caught him by the neck, shook him until he was purple in the face, and then, without a word, tossed him over the fence into his own yard.

Having disposed of this duty, Pete picked up his son, and, taking Lillie gently by the arm, led her back to the house.

"Darling, we won't be long in this hole, to be bothered by such rats!" he said. "I've a secret that will soon give us everything that heart could wish for. I'll tell you about it before long."

He kissed her and stroked her hair tenderly. Then he ate his dinner and started back to the plant.

Pete's kiss lay like a hot coal on Lillie's lips as she thought of her promise to Wilbur. She had married Pete because he had a steady job at Zeigler's junk dump, and she thought he would make her a good living. She may have loved him all the time; she knew she loved him now. There was something in his kiss, in the gentle stroking of her hair, and in his words, that gave evidence of his sincerity, that spoke of his self-denying toil for her ultimate benefit.

Her mind turned to Wilbur. The pleasant dreams which had entranced her while he held her in his arms were now a hideous nightmare. She would have scratched the impudent fellow's eyes out, if she hadn't happened, just at that moment, to be angry with her husband.

She picked little Pete from the floor, washed him, and started to rock him to sleep, her brain awhirl. As his soft little arms closed around her neck, Wilbur's words came back to her:

" We'll leave the dirty-faced, squalling brat with Pete. Good joke on Pete!"

She gathered the child into her arms and cuddled him against her breast with a sob of remorse.

Then the situation which confronted her filled her mind. Wilbur said that he would make a queen of her. He had made her one—a queen of fools. She wasn't bad; she knew she wasn't. Wilbur had only been an innocent diversion from her sordid life, some one to joke with and talk to; but she had promised, and had accepted his money with which to buy " glad rags." The bills burned in her apron pocket like hot embers.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, she laid the child on the bed, took the bills, and thrust them into the stove. As they melted away in the flames, another fear leaped into her distraught mind, and she tried frantically to recover them; but she only burned her hands for the effort.

She had burned Wilbur's money; and when he came for her, and she refused to go, he would demand it. She had allowed him to hold her in his arms, and had promised to run away with him. He would tell about it—not to Pete, perhaps, but to some one who would spread the tale among the neighbors. Very likely he would blab it to Lena Lackey.

Deep down in her heart Lillie knew that he was a profligate, and that the things people said of him were true. He was coming for her at three o'clock. A nervous rigor seized her, and she dropped down in a chair with her eyes on the clock.

Pete walked toward the plant with head erect, whistling " Turkey in the Straw." Years before he had aimed his gun at a target, and this morning the bullet had hit in the bull's-eye.

When he first aimed his gun, he was driving a wagon for old Amos Zeigler, gathering up junk from the countryside. The target was a half interest in the business, and this morning he had placed the partnership papers in his pocket.

His gun was babbitt metal. Soon after he started to work for Zeigler, he conceived the idea of making babbitt from scrap metal, instead of selling the scrap to the city dealers at junk prices. Zeigler purchased a small pot and furnace, and turned this end of the business over to Pete.

As the fame of their product spread among the sawmills and mines, the pot increased in size, until it was now an immense caldron. Pete loved this caldron like a child of his own flesh. It was a creature of his own brain, which had raised him from the humble position of a teamster to a partnership. Long since scrap metal had ceased to satisfy its maw, and it demanded heavy purchases of pig.

A year before Pete had perfected a new babbitt formula, and ran a sample in the bearings of the big shaft at the stave mill. Yesterday he had the engineer take out one of these bearings for inspection. It was as hard and smooth as if it had only been in use for a week. It had a friction resistance that no other babbitt metal could equal.

Pete took this bearing to old Amos Zeigler, and unfolded his dream. They would start to make this new babbitt. Later they would build a smelter to reduce the ores mined in the neighboring mountains, which were now being shipped out in crude state. After that they would harness Pearl River, and would manufacture finished products from their own metal. Amos Zeigler was an old man with a vision, and when Pete Erickson walked out of his house he was a partner in the firm.

As he walked along, whistling, toward the plant, he chuckled. It would be a great surprise for Lillie; but the new bungalow he was building on the hill, the furniture that he was selecting for it, and the car that he had ordered, would be still greater surprises. When everything was ready, he would drive down and get her and the boy, carry them to the new home, and say to her:

" This is what I have been working for, Lillie, and it is yours. I have done this for you because you are the mother of my child, and I love you!"

It would be great! Pete chuckled again.

III

A FEELING of vicious exultation filled Wilbur's heart when he relieved Pete at the furnace, and the latter started home for his dinner.

The boob! The poor ignorant hick! That new babbitt formula!

Wilbur laughed. He hadn't heard mill men curse soft bearings for nothing—not he! He had the formula neatly written down on a sheet of paper in his pocket. He had put it all over Pete. He had his secret and his wife. He had everything but his dirty-faced, squalling kid.

If Lillie Erickson's heart failed her at the last moment, and she insisted on taking little Pete, he'd get rid of the brat, all right. He'd leave it on some doorstep, or drop it off the bridge some night into the Arkansas River. That would stop its squalling!

When Pete came back from dinner, at two o'clock, Wilbur would plead illness. He could always fool the poor boob with that yarn.

He glanced at the pot. There was no dross on the bright, hot metal. Then his eye fell on the thermometer. It was several degrees low, and he tossed some coke into the furnace. He dropped the shovel with a clatter, lighted a cigarette, and started pacing nervously back and forth.

At a quarter to two he glanced at the thermometer again. The metal was still a degree too low.

Reaching up, he caught the chain that controlled the lid of the big caldron. He gave it a pull, but it failed to function. He cursed the pulley near the roof, on which it had stuck. To loosen it, he would have to climb a dirty ladder on the wall, and would soil his clothes.

Wilbur didn't care to climb the ladder; but he knew that Pete would be grouchy if he found the chain out of order when he returned from dinner. Wilbur wanted his fellow workman to be in an amiable frame of mind. Impelled by this thought, he started to mount the ladder.

Two-thirds of the way up, he came to a window which faced the street. Looking out, he saw Pete coming down the sidewalk with head erect. He knew that when Pete walked like that he was in a pleasant state of mind, whistling " Turkey in the Straw " —the only tune the poor fool knew.

Chuckling, Wilbur started to climb again. Brainless Pete, wifeless Pete, left with a dirty-faced, squalling brat to mother!

Perhaps Lillie thought that Wilbur would marry her after they reached Little Rock, and she got a divorce. She was a poor fool, too!

He gained the top of the ladder and leaned over, resting his left hand on a joist. With his right hand he caught the chain and gave it a vicious yank, accompanied by an oath.

He should have been more careful. The chain came loose with a jerk, and one of Wilbur's feet slipped from the ladder, overbalancing him. The fingers of his left hand tore splinters out of the joist as his hold broke. With a shriek of terror, he plunged downward, striking the chain, and caromed headlong into the maw of the big pot.

Pete, nearing the plant, noticed a little pall of blue smoke that hung for an instant over the vent in the roof above the pot. He mentally cursed Wilbur for letting trash get into the metal.

When he came in, his fellow workman was not in sight. Pete looked around. Wilbur always changed his clothes at noon, and his overalls were still in the locker.

" Once a tramp, always a tramp! The damned fool took to the road again, I suppose, just when I was going to boost his wages," he muttered, as he picked up the big ladle and skimmed the dross from the top of the hot metal.

IMMATURITY

A BLOSSOM on an orchard tree
Has charm of immaturity—
The promise of the fruit to be.

The rosebud girl we often see,
With shy, unconscious witchery,
Foretells the woman yet to be.

William Hamilton Hayne

Who Is Bronson Gurney?

THE CURIOUS MYSTERY THAT PUZZLED THE TOWN OF FAIRPORT

By Grace Tyler Pratt

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XVII

ON the morning after the first snowstorm Judge Stone announced that the court was of the opinion that the Jaquith Gurney case should be submitted to the grand jury. He ordered that the defendant be committed to jail, without bail, for appearance before the superior court at its next sitting.

When this news was brought to me by Arthur Rice, Sylvia Brewster was not at home to hear it. She had started for Judge Caxton's early that morning, and had not yet come back.

When she returned to the house, I felt quite sure that she knew of Judge Stone's decision. With a curious cheerfulness about her, there was also a suggestion of grim determination that I had never noticed before. At times, too, she appeared to drop her businesslike mask of alertness, and looked at me with wary eyes.

I did not learn much about her visit to Judge Caxton. After she had told me that she would rather not discuss her conversation with him, she shut her mouth with a determined click which seemed to say that I might expect nothing more from that source.

A few minutes later, however, she relented enough to tell me that Judge Caxton, whom she now seemed to regard as her best friend, had talked over the telephone with Judge Stone, explaining to him about the injury to Sylvia's wrist. Judge Stone had replied that this explanation would have made no difference in his decision. Even without that there was, in his opinion, quite enough evidence to hold the prisoner.

"You see," said Sylvia, "they are determined to keep him locked up, whether they have any cause for it or not!"

Though I felt quite as unhappy about their holding Bronson as she did, I had, of course, heard all the evidence, and I couldn't help feeling that there was a pretty strong case against him. I could understand how it might seem possible that he had committed the crime—possible to any one who didn't know Bronson Gurney. Any one who did know him would understand that he would never hurt a fly.

But Sylvia could not see this. After her call on Judge Caxton she seemed to regard me as an enemy to Bronson, and to prefer to say as little as possible to me. The atmosphere of the house had been uncomfortable enough before, but now it was worse. Sylvia's grim silence was very much harder to endure than her occasional outbursts of indignation.

It was this general unhappy tension, I suppose, that induced me to greet any change whatsoever, and to take in a new boarder—an agent for Bible dictionaries. It certainly had not been my intention to entertain anybody of that description; but on the morning after Sylvia's call on Judge Caxton, on going to the door, I found a dapper, cheerful-looking little man carrying a suit case and a large green bag. He explained that he had taken a certain territory in which to introduce his Bible dictionary, which, he assured me, was a very valuable work. He wanted to make his headquarters in the vicinity, and asked if he might board for a short time at the Gurney house.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that we never took transients, when, glanc-

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ing again at his cheerful, alert face, and still conscious of the chill that held our household in its clutch, I reflected that temporary relief might be afforded by the advent of this sociable, businesslike individual. In my desperation, I grasped at him as a drowning man clutches at a straw. To tell the truth, he looked something like a straw, being long and thin, with straw-colored hair. His name, he said, was Drew.

I obeyed my drowning impulse, and it wasn't five minutes after he had showed me letters from two or three people who had bought Bible dictionaries — Judge Caxton being among the number—before I had him established on the third floor, and had told him that just now we were having dinner at one o'clock.

A little later, when the family of four gathered around the dinner table, I was obliged to admit that my effort to enliven the house was received with little appreciation. Sylvia, after having given Mr. Drew one scant look, confined her attention to either her plate or the window. As for Dr. Thorn, he was so abstracted that, except for a first expression of slight annoyance, he hardly seemed aware of the presence of the stranger in our midst.

But the lack of enthusiasm with which he was received did not act as a damper on the spirits of Mr. Drew. Not receiving proper encouragement from other quarters, he chatted on cheerily to me about the weather, his " territory," and other such matters, which ordinarily would not have interested me in the least; but now I was grateful for his presence. It was much better to hear his high, thin voice chirping out amiable nothings than to sit looking at the coffee cups or the ocean, conscious only of a heavy, disapproving silence.

Just once I was made aware of the shadow. That was when, after Mr. Drew had apparently exhausted his small talk, he said:

" I see by the papers that you are having some excitement about a murder case. Let's see, what's the name of the party they've arrested?"

I told him in two words that the " party " was Bronson Gurney, not thinking it necessary to add that he himself, at that very moment, was occupying the prisoner's chair.

" Do you think he is guilty?" asked Mr. Drew, turning to Dr. Thorn, with an evident polite desire to include him in the conversation.

Either Dr. Thorn did not hear the question, or else he chose to ignore it. Though I had not been asked for my opinion, I hastened to prevent an awkward pause by saying that I fully believed in Bronson's innocence. Then Mr. Drew went on cheerfully telling me about a recent murder case in the western part of the State. Little did I realize the mistake that I had made in seeking release through this mild-faced, childlike entertainer!

That afternoon, after a trip to the Fairport market, I found myself, on returning home, without my latchkey. Going to the side door, which is often left open, I quickly slipped into the dining room. On entering, I was somewhat surprised to find Mr. Drew and Sylvia engaged in what appeared to be close and confidential conversation.

When I appeared so suddenly before her, Sylvia gave a slight start, and then began mumbling something about the great value of the book that Mr. Drew was introducing. I was not deceived by that, for I knew Sylvia well enough to know that she would never feel any very great enthusiasm over Bible dictionaries, and that any interest that she might manifest was due to something else.

Indeed, I felt a little annoyed with her. Though I had come to regard the admiration she inspired in many of the Fairport young men as quite a matter of course, it seemed strange to me that she should consider it worth while to enroll the strawlike Mr. Drew among her admirers.

That evening it occurred to me that I might be doing Sylvia an injustice; for after supper I saw that Mr. Drew had succeeded in drawing Dr. Thorn into conversation, and that the two men were talking quite intently together. I was surprised to see how magnetic Mr. Drew seemed to be. I reasoned that perhaps it was only because he was intensely interested in interesting others, and had a salesman's genius for doing so.

I was not destined to be deceived for very long. After I had gone upstairs that night, and had sat down in my own room to read for a little while before going to bed, I was suddenly impressed with the notion that I heard something very like a step in Dr. Thorn's room, which was next to mine. I was a little surprised at this, because I knew that the doctor had expected to be out all night. He had said so both to Mr. Drew and to me.

I concluded, on the whole, that I had better investigate, and immediately stepped to his door and knocked. My knock brought no response, but when I repeated it there was a quick—

" Come in!"

The words sounded a strange note in my ears, for it was not the voice of Dr. Thorn that spoke them. I obeyed the summons, not knowing what to expect. What I saw, standing there unconcernedly in Dr. Thorn's room, was my agent for Bible dictionaries—Mr. Drew.

" May I ask what you are doing here, sir?" I said, in a voice that sounded very stern to me.

" Oh, it's you, Miss Carter, is it?" he replied, in his usual cheerful tone, and with what seemed an air of relief. " I was afraid it was the doctor. I was going to pretend that I had got into the wrong room. I can make myself pretty stupid when it's necessary; but he's out for the night, I think. As it's you, probably my best course will be to tell the truth. I am not a book agent, as you may suspect. I am a private detective. Following an accepted and well-known custom in cases where detective work is recognized by the law and all its agents, I have been sent to this house—with the knowledge of Miss Brewster — by Judge Caxton."

" To this house?" I echoed. " Why?"

Mr. Drew gave a little cough.

" Perhaps my presence in this room will explain that," he said.

" Mr. Drew," I replied, " you are on the wrong track. You will find nothing that concerns you here."

He hesitated for a moment. Then he said:

" Miss Carter, since I have taken you into my secret, I am going to place still further confidence in you. I have generally found that such a course pays."

With this he stepped to the long oak chest in which Dr. Thorn keeps his surgeon's instruments locked up. He took a key from his pocket, unlocked the chest, opened it, reached in—and from somewhere in its recesses he brought forth and held before my eyes something which caught my breath.

Before I had found my next breath I had lived over, in the flash of an instant, that October afternoon when we had had a strange call, and Bronson Gurney had been put through an examination by Jaquith Gurney. Closely connected with that examination had been the old man's action of testily tapping the floor with his cane, and I had not forgotten that article. It was almost as clear in my recollection as Jaquith himself. Is it any wonder, then, that I felt just a little unnerved when Mr. Drew held up for my inspection old Jaquith Gurney's cane?

" Have you ever seen that before?" he asked, aiming his keen, little eyes straight at me.

" Yes," I answered, feeling as if those sharp eyes were bayonets pointing at my head. " It belongs to Jaquith Gurney."

" I thought as much," he said, with evident satisfaction. " How do you know?"

When I told him, he said nothing, but coolly put the cane back in the chest where he had found it.

" Aren't you going to take it with you?" I asked.

" No, not to-night," he replied. " I haven't found out enough yet. I shall leave everything just as it was when I entered the room. You could swear that you saw the cane here now?"

" I can't swear how it came here," I said. " I don't know but you brought it in yourself. Perhaps you are the one who ought to be watched!"

Just the flicker of a smile passed over Mr. Drew's smooth little face.

" You would make a good detective, Miss Carter," he said; " but we won't worry about my being the murderer just yet. Can you also swear that the cane was not in the chest when you rented the room to the present occupant?"

I told him that I could.

" Now we will get out of this room as soon as possible," he went on. " Something might happen, and it seldom pays to have one's hand forced."

As for me, I felt as if my foot would have to be forced before it could take a step from the room—or was it my heart that was stunned? I only know that somehow I found myself out in the hall and heard Mr. Drew saying:

" Come downstairs, Miss Carter, please. I should like to have a little talk with you."

His calm, businesslike tone gave me such a sensation of helplessness that I felt as if I were his prisoner. It was with a sense of reprieve that I heard a latchkey in the front door, and at the foot of the stairs we suddenly encountered Sylvia.

She had been taking part in the school play, and was still wearing her stage costume. They had been giving "Midsummer Night's Dream," and she had been *Titania,* the queen of the fairies. She looked like a beautiful wood nymph as she threw off her fur coat and stood in her spangly robe, with knots of flowers all about her; but she gave a very meager smile as she saw us two standing together in the hall, and looked questioningly at Mr. Drew, as if waiting for him to start the conversation.

He glanced at her with some surprise and evident admiration. Then, clearing his throat, and assuming command of the situation, he said:

"Miss Brewster, I have thought it wise at this time to take Miss Carter into our confidence. I have explained to her who I am. We now form quite a little company. Perhaps I may regard you, Miss Brewster, as my first lieutenant, and Miss Carter as my second."

Then he explained to her the results of his evening's investigation.

If Mr. Drew had known Sylvia better, he would never have chosen her for the position he had just bestowed on her. In fact, his first lieutenant promptly showed rank insubordination.

"What nonsense is this?" she burst out. "What did you come meddling here for, anyway, with your lies about selling Bible dictionaries?"

Mr. Drew was evidently taken aback. In a tone out of which much of his cheery optimism seemed to have departed, he somewhat baldly stated that he had come to Fairport at Judge Caxton's request, on account of suggestions that Sylvia herself had made.

"Well, I didn't suppose that you'd go prying into Dr. Thorn's room and belongings," she replied. "No gentleman would. Let me tell you that Dr. Thorn is no more a murderer than I am!"

I was wondering if the situation would be helped at all if I should venture to say something, when I was spared that effort by hearing another latchkey. This time it was Dr. Thorn, who came directly in on us as we stood there in the front hall.

I wondered if I gave a guilty start. I certainly felt like a conspirator; but I mumbled out something about having expected him to be out all night.

"So I did," he replied; "but I have lost the case. The boy died half an hour ago."

I knew that it was a case of typhoid, with complications, and I also knew how anxious Dr. Thorn had been to save the young fellow. I could understand why he looked so worn and discouraged now. Sylvia understood, too.

"How hard that is!" she said impulsively. "You must be tired out, Dr. Thorn. You're not going out *again,* are you? Oh, come in and sit down! I'll make you a cup of tea on the gas stove."

Dr. Thorn must have been surprised to have Sylvia show such unusual concern for him; but if he was, he didn't show it. He merely said:

"Thank you, I will, for a few minutes."

As Sylvia disappeared, he sank down into a chair in the living room, while Mr. Drew and I hovered round like restless supernumeraries. When *Titania* brought back a savory cup of my best orange pekoe tea, Dr. Thorn only looked at her as if he were in a dream. Then he rose, as he took the steaming cup, and said, with a glance at her forest costume:

"Thank you, Miss Sylvia."

One of the few Latin words that I remember is *silva,* a forest, and I knew that was what he was thinking of when he called her Sylvia. That was why he looked as if he were watching a play as he sat there; but for me this was no "Midsummer Night's Dream." It was all like a horrible nightmare.

XVIII

THE next day, I remember, was one of continued discomfort. Sylvia had again completely veered about in her attitude toward the household. The day before she had apparently assumed that she and Mr. Drew were friends of Bronson, and were banded together against Dr. Thorn and me, whom she chose to regard as enemies. Now she seemed to look upon Mr. Drew and myself as fellow conspirators, plotting against Dr. Thorn, whom she must protect!

I could not but resent this attitude as wholly unjust to me, for I had been forced into an uncomfortable position by circumstances which Sylvia had had her share in producing; but I realized that she was in a most unhappy frame of mind. I believed that her present feeling was due to the fact that she was in part responsible for the presence of Mr. Drew, and that now she fully understood the serious consequences to which her action might lead.

She spoke very little to any one that day; but once, out of a clear sky, she informed me that she thought of joining the Catholic church. She would like to know something about the regulations of confession, and whether the priest was obliged to keep secret what was told him during the ceremony. She also inquired what opinion I had of Father O'Connor, the Catholic priest in Fairport. When I told her that I knew practically nothing about him, as I had never even seen him, and that I knew equally little about the laws of confession, she fell again into disapproving silence, and made no effort to consult me further.

As for me, I felt that I was on the edge of a powder magazine, and that the worst might happen at any minute. Sylvia's remarks about the Catholic priest only added to my uneasiness, for it would not have surprised me in the least if she had summoned him to the house, as an aid in straightening out our tangle.

In fact, when the doorbell rang, I was quite sure that I caught a glimpse of Father O'Connor's long black coat from the window; but the caller proved to be only Arthur Rice, in his best clothes—at which I was immensely relieved; for it hardly seemed to me that I felt equal to the other contingency. It was as much as I could do to bear the burden of the inquisitive Mr. Drew's presence.

Though I tried to say as little as possible to that gentleman, he insisted on regarding me as his confidant, and on consulting me frequently. I had no sooner seated myself in the living room with my sewing, that afternoon, with the pleasant impression that every one was out, and that I should have a few minutes of peace and quiet, when in he popped, quite ready for a chat.

"Where is Miss Brewster?" he inquired.

When I told him that she was not back from school, he said:

"You see, I suppose, how Miss Brewster has changed in her attitude toward me?"

When I admitted that I had noticed it, he looked at me, apparently in thought.

"I don't believe in her," he went on, pacing up and down before the fireplace. "I think she's acting a part. Do you know why I came here?"

Mr. Drew's pacings stopped, and he stood looking at me, with his hands behind him.

"It was because of information that Miss Brewster gave Judge Caxton. She told him, for one thing, that when Dr. Thorn and she first searched the house of Jaquith Gurney, the doctor said something which showed that he wasn't in the least surprised to find that the old man had apparently been murdered. That, mind you, was before any one else had mentioned the thought of murder. Then she told the judge how ready Dr. Thorn had been to place the guilt on the Gurney claimant from the start, and some other things so suspicious that Judge Caxton was persuaded that it was his duty to take a hand and call me in. You know the result of my investigations—the finding of Jaquith Gurney's cane—a most amazing and important discovery, as I understand that the old man never moved without his cane, and undoubtedly had it with him at the time of his murder. It is a damning piece of evidence, and yet—that is just what bothers me. I don't believe that Dr. Thorn ever put the cane in the chest, and I don't believe that he ever had it in his hands. I can't find a satisfactory motive for his murdering Jaquith Gurney, and I believe that he is an innocent man. I have accounted for every minute of his time that Sunday evening, when it is supposed that the murder was committed."

Mr. Drew stopped for a moment, but he evidently had more to say, and I did not speak.

"The question is, of course," he went on, "if Dr. Thorn didn't put the cane in his chest, who did? I believe that it was Miss Brewster. I believe that she put it there because she meant that I should find it. She got me here. Now that she has accomplished what she wanted, and I have discovered what she wanted me to discover, she veers about and tries to make it evident that she is out of sympathy with my investigations and supports Dr. Thorn. I believe that she is a strangely constituted person who, just now, is acting a part. She knows more about this case than she has ever told!"

I had thought that I was ready for anything, but I was not ready for this. I could hardly comprehend such an overwhelming theory.

"She couldn't have put the cane there!" I asserted faintly.

"There are various ways of explaining that she might have," went on Mr. Drew, taking a few more paces up and down the room, and then coming to a standstill, with his hands again behind him. "One of them is this. Mind, now, I don't say that this is what happened. I only ask you to regard it as a possible supposition. Of course, the first person of whom we would think as having placed the cane in its hiding place, after Dr. Thorn, would be the Gurney claimant. It may be that he did it, but I don't believe it. On that Sunday night Dr. Thorn was in his room. The claimant could not have done it then. Early the next morning he went to Judge Caxton's, and was his guest for two days. If he was in possession of the cane at that time, he certainly would not have left it at loose ends for two days, would he? I believe that Miss Brewster had charge of it during those forty-eight hours. Admit, as a plausible supposition, that on Sunday night, the 18th of November, when the Gurney claimant came home, Jaquith Gurney's cane was in the bottom of his boat. He had neglected to make away with it. A cane is a hard thing to dispose of in the water, for it will float. Perhaps, too, he didn't know it was there. In his naturally agitated state of mind, he didn't notice it. He asked Miss Brewster to go out rowing with him that night after he came home. She discovered it. He told her something—what I don't know—perhaps the same story he told you about Jaquith Gurney's having a brief talk with him in the boat. Might not Miss Brewster, as a result of some joking conversation, have taken the cane that night? Or admit, for the sake of argument, that the Gurney claimant kept it that night, that he even kept it for several days, concealed in some way, until the owner of it was found to be a victim of foul play, and that then Miss Brewster, to protect the claimant, whom she perhaps regarded as a victim of circumstantial evidence, took possession of it. I believe that she is in love with the young man. After his arrest that fact would be enough to induce her to do anything to help him, particularly if she believed that the prisoner was innocent and the doctor guilty. That is one answer to your question as to why Miss Brewster should place the cane in the hiding place where it was found. There is another solution which puts her in a less favorable light, but which I will not go into now. She is a curious and difficult person to deal with. I will tell you what course of action I have decided to adopt with her."

But he had no opportunity to tell me that, for just then I saw Sylvia coming down the path.

"Miss Brewster is coming home from school," I said.

"Very well," replied Mr. Drew, quite equal to the occasion. "I am going to have a conversation with her, and I want you to remain."

I assured him that when she saw us talking together, she would go directly to her room.

"I shall request her to stop," he said. "Do not be surprised at anything I may say to her."

Sylvia came in, carrying a big bunch of white bayberry and red alder. On seeing us, she turned quickly to go upstairs, as I had expected; but Mr. Drew had no intention of allowing her to escape him. He stepped forward.

"Miss Brewster," he said, "please come in here a moment. I wish to ask you some questions."

Sylvia's expression seemed to ask by what right he was acting. She came into the room, but it was quite clear that she intended to give him only a few minutes of her time.

Mr. Drew began his inquisition with startling abruptness.

"How do you suppose Jaquith Gurney's cane came to be in Dr. Thorn's room?" he asked.

Sylvia's face flushed.

"I decline to advance any theory upon that subject, Mr. Drew," she replied.

"Did you put it there?" asked Mr. Drew, turning on her quickly with a sharp flash in his keen gray eyes.

The flash from those gray eyes was countered with one just as sudden from Sylvia's blue ones.

"What if I did?" she said in low, quick tones.

"Did you?" repeated Mr. Drew.

"I decline to answer that question," replied Sylvia.

She had now regained her composure, and her tones were calm and baffling.

"Can you say that you did not put it there?" insisted Mr. Drew.

"No, I cannot, and indeed I will not," returned Sylvia. "And now, if there is nothing else you wish to question me about, I will, with your kind permission, go up to my room."

"I am a little surprised," said Mr. Drew, when she had gone. "I was ready to have her deny it. I can't fathom her. She is deep—as deep as the sea, and, for all I know, as treacherous!"

After this remark he gave a sigh, and followed it up by saying, in a tone of deep conviction:

"Mark my words, Miss Carter, the searchers for the murderer or murderers of Jaquith Gurney need not look far beyond this house!"

These words fell on my ears with ominous significance. As I looked back at Mr. Drew, I was afraid that I might do something hysterical. I felt myself in the clutch of a nervous chill.

I judge that my outward demeanor must have been fairly composed, however, for after regarding me with another sigh, apparently concluding that nothing was to be gained by further conversation, Mr. Drew left me for more work in Fairport. I listened to his retreating footsteps with an unutterable relief.

I knew that his departure meant no relaxation of effort on his part. I had no doubt that he would find out everything he wanted to know about everybody in town. I had thought that selling Bible dictionaries, in itself, must be hard work, but it now seemed hardly worth mentioning in comparison with his labors as a detective. He sometimes came home looking thoroughly exhausted, but I don't think that he ever abandoned a trip until he found out what he wanted. As I saw him set off that afternoon, with his green bag, I reflected that he certainly was earning his money, and I wondered if Sylvia was to pay him.

At supper he joined us again. The afternoon's investigations had left him in an almost depleted condition. At all events, quite contrary to his former habits, he made no effort at conversation, but was as silent as Sylvia and Dr. Thorn, neither of whom had anything to say to anybody.

When I realized that Mr. Drew, my only dependable conversational resource, had failed me, I surrendered hopelessly. There wasn't a moment, during that meal, when I wouldn't have been both glad and grateful to see the Catholic priest walk in.

After it was over, Sylvia slipped on her red cloak, with an absent face, and murmured that she was going out for a little exercise.

It was an evening of bright moonlight. As I sat down in my accustomed chair in the living room, in a kind of passive dejection, I could see her moving toward the sea, and then out over the rocks. I watched her as she wandered there by the cliffs, alone. Every few minutes she would stop and look down at the sea, roaring deep and black below, and I wondered uneasily why she had chosen that lonely place for an evening walk. I could not keep my eyes away from the solitary figure in its crimson covering, standing out so plainly against the dark background.

I did not even turn when Dr. Thorn came in, with Mr. Drew behind him; nor did I make any move to pull down the curtain, or to join in the conversation. I knew that neither of the men had anything in particular to say to me. I was wondering if Mr. Drew wanted to talk with Dr. Thorn alone, when I was reassured by hearing him say:

"Dr. Thorn, if you are at liberty, I should like to have a few words with you. We need have no objection to Miss Carter's presence. In fact, I should prefer to have her here."

Just then Sylvia's restless wanderings stopped again, and the crimson-coated figure leaned away over, so much absorbed did she seem in watching the black waves beneath. I couldn't help recalling what Bronson had told me the night he rescued her. The waters seemed to be trying to snatch her out of his grasp, he said; and now I felt sure, as she stood there, that the sea was calling to her.

Whatever any one might tell me to the contrary, I shall always know that during those few long minutes, while I sat there breathlessly watching her, she was wondering if it would not be easier to obey the call of the sea than to turn back to land. I was just on the point of yielding to my distraught feelings, and of begging the men to go down and rescue her, when she gave one lingering look at the water and turned away.

Then I was conscious of Mr. Drew's voice saying in low, confidential tones to Dr. Thorn:

"I may now admit to you that connection with a book agency is not my legitimate vocation. In fact, it is only a cloak. I was employed by a man of standing and of legal reputation, who has a keen interest in the Gurney case, to come to this house as a private detective."

"Oh, indeed!" said Dr. Thorn coldly.

"I know you want to go out, doctor," Mr. Drew went on, "and I shall not take your time with unnecessary words. I shall make a long story short and tell you that I have discovered old Mr. Jaquith Gurney's cane, which he undoubtedly had with him on the night of the murder, hidden in your room."

At this revelation I think Dr. Thorn did start a little. I am sure he changed color, but even now his voice did not sound especially agitated as he repeated:

"Indeed!"

The doctor cleared his throat, as if he was about to say something more, but Mr. Drew broke in with—

"No, don't deny it. It would hardly be worth while; for I haven't much idea that you put it there."

"May I ask who you think did?" said Dr. Thorn.

"Between you and me, I am inclining to the opinion that it was Miss Brewster who did so," replied Mr. Drew. "She has been told where Mr. Gurney's cane was found and asked if she placed it there, and she does not deny it."

Here Dr. Thorn made a quick, impatient movement, as if to speak, but Mr. Drew held up his hand.

"Just one moment, please," the detective went on. "Of course we should like to think that the Gurney claimant placed the cane in its hiding place, but we have accounted for every minute of his time for forty-eight hours, and we can't find that he had the opportunity to do it. Only three other persons, besides yourself, had access to your room—Miss Carter, Mary Andrews, and Miss Brewster. We feel sure, after careful investigation, that we have made no mistake in eliminating Miss Carter and Mary Andrews from the situation. There remain you and Miss Brewster. All my efforts to eliminate you two have been unsuccessful. I am convinced that either you or Miss Brewster hid this peculiarly significant piece of evidence—Jaquith Gurney's cane. In my opinion, Miss Brewster was the one who did it."

Mr. Drew had spoken to me about the difficulty of comprehending a temperament like Sylvia's. I regarded her as an easy problem compared with Dr. Thorn, who was, to me, like an uncharted sea.

"You have made a mistake in that opinion, sir," he said in his usual self-controlled tone.

"How do you know that?" asked Mr. Drew quickly.

Dr. Thorn paused a moment. Then he replied:

"Because I put it there myself."

"Under what circumstances?" rejoined Mr. Drew sharply.

Dr. Thorn paused again.

"I found it when I was at Jaquith Gurney's house," he said slowly, "and decided that I would save it."

"Indeed!" responded Mr. Drew dryly. "Did you tell any one about this, either at the time or since?"

"You are the first person to whom I have mentioned it," replied Dr. Thorn.

Mr. Drew smiled contemptuously.

"Your explanation is rather a lame one, doctor."

"Never mind," said Dr. Thorn. "I tell you that I put Jaquith Gurney's cane in my trunk."

"But it wasn't found in your trunk," said Mr. Drew quickly. "It was in your chest."

"That, of course, was what I meant," said Dr. Thorn. "I repeat that I put Jaquith Gurney's cane in my chest."

Just then Sylvia entered the room. With her pale face lit up by her flashing blue eyes, she came among us like a gleam of pure flame. She had heard Dr. Thorn's last words, for now she turned to him.

"Dr. Thorn, you are mistaken," she said. "You did not hide that cane. You are only saying that to save me. I am to blame for everything. I am responsible for the presence of this man"—with a contemptuous wave in the direction of Mr. Drew. "I wanted to save Bronson Gurney, and I placed suspicion on you. I can't go on with such an insane, desperate game. I can't hear you condemn yourself, for I know you are innocent!"

As she stopped for breath, Dr. Thorn put my thoughts into words.

"Miss Brewster, you come into our midst bearing a flaming sword," he said quietly. "Yes, I am innocent of crime, but I think we shan't question your innocence either, for"—after a moment's pause, and with the ghost of a smile—"you know it was an angel, after all, who bore the flaming sword." He turned to Mr. Drew. "As I told you, I am responsible for that cane. If you have no other questions to ask me, I have a patient to attend to."

The doctor withdrew, with no objection from Mr. Drew, who evidently thought that there might be difficulties in conducting a cross-examination with Sylvia at hand. When he had gone, the rest of us, exhausted by the emotions of the day, had nothing more to say, and were glad to be allowed to go quietly to our rooms.

I went to sleep, wondering whether Dr. Thorn had told the truth or had decided to sacrifice the truth for something else.

XIX

THE next morning I went to call on Bronson Gurney. He was allowed to have visitors at certain times, and had expressed a desire to see me.

Sylvia Brewster would have been glad to go with me. She told me to ask Bronson if she might come on Saturday morning, when there was no school.

Bronson was genuinely glad to see me. Except for the fact that he was a little more serious, he appeared much as usual. He was interested in everything that pertained to the Gurney house. He even inquired about my night-blooming cereus, and said that he hoped he should be at home by the time it blossomed.

When I gave him Sylvia's message, he seemed much pleased, and had me repeat over to him just what she had said. Then, after thinking a minute, he shook his head dejectedly.

" No," he said, " that wouldn't do. I don't want her to come here to see me. You tell her so, the best way you can. Tell her it won't be long before I can come to see her, instead."

He wanted to know what she was doing all this time, and where she was going. I told him that the school was to have a dance that evening, but that with the gloom cast over the house by his imprisonment, Sylvia had thought she didn't care to go.

" Tell her I don't want her to miss any good times on my account," he said earnestly. " Ask her to go as a special favor to me."

In fact, I found him so sensible in his way of looking at everything, and so eager to hear all the news, that I kept nothing from him, even telling him about Mr. Drew and the detective's discovery of Jaquith Gurney's cane.

Bronson was considerably moved at this.

" You don't mean it!" he broke out. Then he brought his clenched hand down on his knee with decision, and said slowly: " I wonder if that is the solution of the thing! I know what it is for an innocent person to be accused of murder, and Heaven knows I wouldn't do any man that wrong; but there have always been things about Dr. Thorn that have looked queer. He has been against me from the start, and has seemed to want to get me out of the way. He knew I'd be the victim, if harm came to Jaquith Gurney. Do you suppose he's congratulating himself now? He has never taken any pains not to have me understand how he hated me, though I have never let it actually bother me. It isn't so easy to call any one a murderer. At first I didn't think a murder had been committed. I didn't think the old man was dead. I believed he would turn up as crusty as ever. When his body was found, of course I had to change my theory, though even then I felt that his death might have been accidental."

I told Bronson that the careful description of the wound in the neck, which was given in court, had convinced me that Jaquith Gurney's death could not have been accidental.

" But who was the only one who testified about that wound?" he rejoined quickly. " Dr. Thorn. The question is, how much is his testimony worth? Then, again, who was it who identified the body? Dr. Thorn. Perhaps he lied. Perhaps the body wasn't that of Jaquith Gurney. He may have been made away with on land. I never believed that he was killed on that Sunday night when we talked together down in the boat, with not a sign of harm coming from anywhere. After thinking about it a great deal—I have had time to think a great deal since I have been here—I incline to the opinion that he met his death on the following day—Monday, the 19th of November."

There was a pause. I was thinking over what Bronson had said.

" Miss Carter," he resumed, " I am not accusing any one, but I can't help remembering that I saw our friend the doctor drive off early that Monday morning, and I should be interested to know where he went to. He did not come back till dinner time. I was at the Caxtons' then, and I saw him coming along at a pretty rapid rate. I want you to find out where Dr. Thorn spent that Monday morning, Miss Carter!"

I told him that I was willing to do all I could to find out about it.

" But," I added, " though I can't pretend to explain or understand about the discovery of the cane, I believe that Dr. Thorn is an honest man."

"I don't say that he isn't," replied Bronson. "I don't accuse him, but some one is guilty, and I'm going to do all I can to find out who it is. I don't propose to be made a martyr of!"

He was silent for a minute. Then he asked earnestly:

"Do you believe an innocent person is ever found guilty of murder?"

I hastened to assure him that I was confident that such cases were very rare.

"Miss Carter," he said, still more earnestly, "you know, don't you, that I'm innocent?"

"Bronson Gurney, I know that you are innocent," I replied, without a moment's hesitation.

After that we talked cheerfully about other matters, much as we would have talked if we had been sitting before the fire in the living room at the Gurney house. Though I told him anything which I thought might interest him, there was just one bit of gossip that I did not mention. This was the testimony given by a Fairport lawyer, named Brown, regarding a last and very characteristic act of Jaquith Gurney.

Mr. Brown said that on the day after the injunction hearing, when the question of the identity of Bronson Gurney had been before the court, the old man had come to him and told him that he wished to change his will. In the will that the lawyer then had in his possession, Jaquith had left everything, with the exception of an annuity bequeathed to his housekeeper, to the village cemetery in which the Gurneys were buried. Now, in view of the change made by Jaquith, all his money, with the exception of the housekeeper's annuity and a sufficient amount to pay for his own funeral and gravestone, was to be used for contesting the claim of "the impostor who calls himself Bronson Gurney." If, after this suit was equitably settled, there was any residue of his property—of which, truth to tell, there was a goodly accumulation—it was to go to the cemetery.

I did not tell Bronson about this, for I was afraid that it might depress him to know that in death Jaquith Gurney was as powerful a foe as he had ever been in life.

When I left my poor prisoner, my state of mind was by no means comfortable. Things seemed to be about as badly mixed up as they could well be. One decision, however, I arrived at; and that afternoon, when I had delivered Sylvia Bronson's message, I took the bull by the horns and had my say.

"I am just about distracted with anxiety," I began. "Dr. Thorn apparently believes Bronson guilty; Bronson suspects Dr. Thorn; I don't know but Mr. Drew suspects *you*. He says that we don't need to go far from this house to find the murderer. Perhaps I ought to suspect Mr. Drew. I don't know what to think or do. Now I appeal to you, Miss Brewster, to take your part in helping to simplify the situation, and to tell me whether you know how it happens that Jaquith Gurney's cane was found in Dr. Thorn's room."

Sylvia did not answer immediately, but hesitated for a minute. Then she said quite calmly:

"You say you are distracted with anxiety. So am I. You have more cause to pity me than I to pity you. I would tell you all I knew, if I could; but I can't. Instead, let me ask you a question. Do you think there is any chance of Dr. Thorn's being arrested now?"

"Not except as an accessory," I replied; "which, on the face of it, isn't to be considered. No, Bronson Gurney's trial has to come off first."

"Then," she said, "we must devote all our energies, for the present, to freeing Bronson. Let's set about doing it, you and I, and—and *do* it!"

I was only too glad, after experiencing so much of Sylvia's disapproval during the past few days, to have her willing to form a comradeship with me. I replied that I was more than ready to do all I could.

"In the first place," she went on cheerfully, "we must get Mr. Drew out of this house. I feel uncomfortable all the time that he's here. I told Judge Caxton so yesterday. I rather think he will leave us soon, anyway. I think that's Mrs. Peabody coming, isn't it?" she asked absently, her eyes upon the window.

I was glad enough to see our neighbor again, and I think we talked for more than an hour about the troubles of our little town. Mrs. Peabody was anxious to do something, but felt quite as helpless as the rest of us.

As she rose to leave us, she referred in a thoroughly disgusted way to the great excitement created in the mind of one of her maids by the stories told by a crystal gazer, as she called her. It seemed that this person, who was temporarily located in a room over the Fairport bank, revealed one's past, present, and future by catching the gleams that came from a crystal ball. She had told Mrs. Peabody's maid such strange tales that the girl had not been able to resist the temptation of confiding them to her mistress, who evidently had not been properly impressed. She said that it ought to be against the law thus to impose on credulous girls.

Sylvia listened to all this intently, and the moment Mrs. Peabody had gone she broke out impulsively:

"Miss Carter, let's go right down and see if that crystal gazer can tell us who killed Jaquith Gurney! I have been trying to think of something I can do to solve the mystery until my brain is at the cracking point. It goes around and around in a circle, and never gets anywhere at all."

My own mental processes, in trying to act as a detective, were very much like Sylvia's; but I had just enough sense left to argue that going to this ignorant woman was merely wasting our time. Indeed, worse than wasting our time, it was encouraging fraud.

"No matter!" returned Sylvia. "Hints often come from unexpected sources, and she may suggest something that will give us an idea. Those who travel only the conventional paths never find anything interesting. The children were reading this afternoon about the *Vicar of Wakefield's* listening to the fortune teller, because he was 'tired of being always wise.' I'm tired of being always wise. If we are broad-minded enough to be foolish, perhaps we can learn something."

Though Sylvia was scarcely the person whom I should accuse of being always wise, and though I found it difficult to see how running after a faker was a proof of breadth of mind, I demurred weakly—and then, with a final inward protest, I acquiesced. So Sylvia Brewster and I, Eliza Carter—who was quite old enough to know better—set forth to call upon the crystal gazer.

XX

Upon reaching the quarters that we sought, and scanning the surroundings on all sides to make sure that none of her pupils witnessed her entrance, Sylvia had gone darting up the stairs to the little room where, according to the card in the window, Mme. Viola was established. I am free to state that my regret at having consented to being drawn into this predicament increased with every stair. Indeed, I think Sylvia herself repented of her rashness; but evidently feeling that it was too late to retreat, she went straight on and opened the door.

We found ourselves in the presence of Mme. Viola, who came forward at our entrance, with her dark eyes—more suggestive of Spain than of France—fixed upon us. Sylvia explained, a little haltingly, that we wished to consult her.

"Singly or together?" inquired the crystal gazer.

I put in my word at that point, saying, in as dignified accents as I could summon, that while I did not care for a reading myself, I should like to be present during Sylvia's consultation.

After explaining to us that the charge, in that case, would be double that for a single reading, Mme. Viola sat down, her two consultants before her, and peered long and silently into her crystal. Suddenly she stretched out her hand and laid it gracefully upon Sylvia's wrist. Sylvia jumped so that I was ashamed of her; but she told me afterward that she had never felt anything so much like a shock from a heavily charged electric battery.

Mme. Viola's eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon her subject.

"You have lived many lives," she began. "You have been millions of men and millions of women. You are fast being rarified, and soon you will be sublimated into divine ether." She paused. "While here on this sphere for a few brief minutes in the æons of eternity, is there anything which you would like to ask me about?"

Sylvia, who had looked somewhat bored during this account of her sublimation, now responded tersely that she would like to get some information as to how a certain old man came to his death.

Perhaps this was not the first time that Mme. Viola had been consulted on that very subject. Possibly the existence of this much debated mystery had been the reason for her choosing Fairport as the present scene of her labors. At all events, she showed no surprise, but closed her eyes and asked for a description of the old man spoken of.

Sylvia was doing very creditably, considering that she had never seen old Jaquith, when Mme. Viola stretched forth her hand.

"Stop!" she commanded. "I see before me a house—then a meadow—just beyond. On the ground lies the old man you have described. Bending over him stands another man—a younger man—holding something sharp in his hand. Ah, I see him quite clearly now!"

Why was it that at that moment there flashed into my mind, with such persistence that I could not banish it, the image of Dr. Thorn?

"Let me describe him," she went on.

Then she portrayed, with such exactness that I could hardly keep from crying out, the figure which was standing out so clearly in my consciousness. There was no mistaking Dr. Thorn.

As the description went on, perfect in every detail, I was ready for an outbreak from Sylvia. I felt that I should have welcomed anything that would put an end to the tenseness of those moments. To my surprise, I heard her saying in calm, even tones:

"That is all we care to know. You have told us quite enough."

In spite of my protestations, she then insisted on paying for both of us, and we made as dignified an exit as possible.

At the door we met Arthur Rice, who bowed and looked at us with an inquiring expression. I wondered if he was on the way to consult Mme. Viola.

Sylvia was very silent on her way home, and I found myself trying to reason out a solution of the strange experience we had just undergone. Of course, it might be that the explanation was a natural one—that the so-called seer had come into possession of a rumor which was growing more persistent every day; for there had somehow gathered a cloud of suspicion so dark that I had felt it, and had wondered if even Dr. Thorn could be wholly blind to it.

Again, it might be, by some law of thought which I did not pretend to understand, that the image which had come into my mind, perhaps through the suggestion that Bronson had thrown out that morning, had been transmitted to the mind of Mme. Viola. Whether it was the suspicion of the community, or my own vision, that had influenced the crystal gazer, that quarter of an hour with her made me realize the power of thought, and know that in its results it may be more deadly than a sword.

Somehow, neither Sylvia nor I cared then to talk over our experience together. Even two hours later, at the supper table, I think we both felt thankful when Dr. Thorn joined us. Mr. Drew, after an afternoon with Judge Caxton, had finally taken his departure, with courteous farewells, and there were only the three of us left.

From the moment that we sat down, I think we all felt relief at the detective's absence. In spite of our experience of the afternoon, there seemed to be a different atmosphere hovering about us—a feeling of comradeship which there had never been before—something more like the comradeship which Sylvia and I had had with Bronson, and yet different, too.

I think it was something of this feeling that induced Sylvia to attempt to throw off the uncanny influence of the seer by saying, almost gayly:

"Dr. Thorn, where do you suppose we have been this afternoon?"

When the doctor politely replied that he was unable to guess, Sylvia went on still more gayly:

"We paid a visit to Mme. Viola, the crystal gazer."

At this Dr. Thorn looked mildly surprised, and then replied that he never could see how people could waste their money on nonsense of that sort.

"I can understand one's going to a circus," he said; "for there, in a way, one gets one's money's worth. With a fortune teller there is no return for one's money. I could tell you just as good a fortune as that woman, who probably charged you fifty cents."

Sylvia didn't say that it was two dollars that she paid Mme. Viola. Instead, she went on in what seemed to me a half desperate way:

"But we didn't go there to have our fortunes told. We went to ask her who killed Jaquith Gurney."

Dr. Thorn's face changed, but he said nothing.

"And what do you suppose, Dr. Thorn?" Sylvia continued, in a voice which sounded a little tremulous under its effort at unconcern. "She gave a description of the murderer that fitted you to a T!"

I held my breath; but I needn't have done so. Dr. Thorn didn't seem in the least concerned at this revelation.

"Isn't that your fancy, perhaps?" he said. "I won't say that you have too much imagination, but I really think that on the whole you might put it to better use than going around visiting humbugs like this. Why don't you invent an elaborate design for embroidery, or write a novel?"

As he made this suggestion, Dr. Thorn helped himself to another piece of my caramel cake, which he ate with appreciation. I think that Sylvia and I each breathed a sigh of relief. By his words and action he had laid low the ghost that had been hovering around our table. What was it that made him seem so safe and wholesome?

I am sure that I, for one, was sorry to have him go out that evening. I rather think that Sylvia was, too.

"Don't forget your offer to tell our fortunes some day," she said cheerfully, as he left us.

"Oh, no, and there will be no charge," he answered.

Sylvia did not go to the dance that night, in spite of Bronson's advice. As she said good night to me, almost three hours later, looking back from the doorway, I felt a sense of peace and security which I had not experienced for a long time, and which was not wholly due to the absence of Mr. Drew from under our roof. I realized that the union between the great and small was more intimate than I knew, and that if my perceptions were finer, in one swift, revealing glance I should understand the mysterious and innate bond between the laws of thought transference and caramel cake!

I turned to lock the windows for the night, glancing down at my night-blooming cereus as I did so. It was then that I became aware that the great white bud was swelling to the bursting point. I had not expected this for another night.

Feeling strangely excited, I called softly to Sylvia from the hall. In a minute she was with me again.

"It's going to open!" she cried delightedly. "Oh, let's sit down and watch it!"

Another step sounded just outside, and Dr. Thorn came in. He looked genuinely pleased to find us both up, and was much interested in the opening of the strange nocturnal flower.

And so we three watched the lovely thing as it swelled and spread till the last quivering white petal pushed out, and the blossom lay disclosed, as clear and open as day—a white and shining rebuke to all mystery and misunderstanding. Were the others thinking of that, too?

"That's a miracle, isn't it?" Dr. Thorn said in hushed tones.

Then Sylvia sneezed, and our wonderful moment was over; but something of its touch was still upon each of us, I think, as we parted for the night.

XXI

THE next morning one of Fairport's protracted northeast storms came down on us. To add to this, the fireplace in the living room, which had always appeared to have a fine draft, took to pouring forth smoke, and there seemed to be no remedy except to put out the fire and wait for the wind to change.

My serenity of the evening before had hopelessly disappeared. I felt restless forebodings. Almost every possible thing of a tragically disturbing nature had already happened, but an unnamable something, entirely beyond definition, was hovering over me now and converting me into a superstitious neurasthenic. When the dénouement came, it was so unlike anything that my wildest fancy had conjured up—but I will tell you.

It was nearing four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was alone in the living room. I remember that the rain had somewhat abated, and instead of the steady downpour there was a monotonous drip, drip, drip, the sound of which came in from the steps and walks outside. I had taken to my afghan again, as a relief to my feelings. As I started off on a rather flaunting yellow stripe, I meditated upon the memorial service which was to be held for Jaquith Gurney the next day.

The poor man's body, after identification and examination, had been interred at once, without rite or ceremony; and now a brief service had been decided upon as a final and fitting tribute. True, Jaquith Gurney had ceased attending church years before; but it was known not only that he held a great respect for the institution, but that on a certain day, every year, it had been his custom to make a substantial donation to the church treasurer.

It also had been a custom with him to appear at the funerals of old residents of Fairport; and as these occasions—with the exception of town meetings—were the only times of his public appearance with the townspeople, it seemed a pity to omit, in his case, the service for which he had shown so much respect.

At three o'clock the next afternoon, then, a simple service was to be held in the Congregational church. The minister had postponed an intended trip to Boston for a denominational conference.

I remember that I was just hoping that the sun would come out before morning, so that the ceremony for the old man might be a little less mournful, when I heard a strange sound. At first it startled me so much that it confused me. I had heard that sound once before. Had superstition made a hopeless victim of me?

I asked myself if the anxiety and strain of the last few days had been too much for me, and if my wits were leaving me—and, as I did so, I heard the sound repeated. Three little quavering clicks—they came again, three little pecks, like a bird from the sea pecking weakly at the door.

Surely I was not only superstitious, but imbecile, to begin noticing the *manner* in which people knocked at the door! Probably the majority of them knocked in practically the same way—hundreds of them, anyway.

As I went through the front hall, to open the door, I don't know what I expected to see. I don't know that I expected to see anything.

What I did behold was the figure of a little, bent old man with a big book under his arm. As I looked again at the book, my eyes became riveted on it, for I saw that it was a family Bible—either a family Bible or the ghost of a family Bible!

I tried to stretch forth my hand and touch the strange figure, or, if that melted away, to touch the sacred book; but I could not do it. I heard a strange, far-away voice saying:

"Good afternoon, Mr. Gurney. Will you walk in?"

I heard another voice, a little nearer, answering:

"Thank you, madam. I will detain you only a few minutes."

Then some one took off his hat, and I went through the front hall, followed by Jaquith Gurney, who had been drowned! I could hear the sound of his quick, short steps behind me.

When I reached the living room, I turned to see if he had vanished. When I found that he was still there, it occurred to me to shout—to rush out and ring all the bells in town—to go after Bronson Gurney, and bring him home!

But that unnamable something, which had been haunting me all day, was suddenly upon me again, and I knew that the play was not yet played out. Had it only just begun?

"Just begun!" something seemed to sing in my brain.

"Won't you be seated, Mr. Gurney?" I said weakly.

He took a chair. This was not a ghost, then! It was Jaquith Gurney — Jaquith Gurney in the flesh. He was laying the family Bible on his knees, opening it, and pointing with a birdlike finger to a name and a date.

"I came to show you, madam, that I have had that little matter about which I spoke to you rectified," began the thin, formal tones. "You will remember that I found an error in the record of Abijah Gurney's birth. You will see now that the proper date, 1822, replaces the incorrect one which had been inserted."

Every note of the well remembered voice struck sharply on my ears. What I tried to say was that I was not interested in Abijah Gurney's birth—that I was interested in finding out when Jaquith Gurney had died and come to life again. Instead, I feebly inquired:

"Who changed the date, Mr. Gurney?"

"Abijah Gurney's son, William Gurney, who lives in a small town near Chicago," he replied.

Flesh and blood, and more of it!

"I did not feel, madam, like taking the responsibility of changing the family records," he went on. "As I did not care to trust the Gurney family Bible to an express company, I felt, in order to adjust the matter rightly, that it was my duty to take the book to my cousin William Gurney, and put the responsibility of correcting the date into his hands. I knew he would be as much annoyed as I to have so grave an error in our family records go uncorrected."

"When did you go to Chicago?" I asked.

"On the evening of November 18," he answered.

"Yes—November 18!" I echoed witlessly. I made a supreme effort to control myself. "Bronson Gurney told me that he went over to see you that night," I added in tones which I couldn't but respect.

It was with increased formality that Jaquith Gurney replied:

"It is true that the young man who claims to be Bronson Gurney came to my house on that evening. He invited me to sit in his boat, which I consented to do, as my train did not go till midnight, and I was already prepared for the journey. Soon after leaving him, I walked to Chesterfield Junction, where I took the midnight express for Chicago. That train does not stop at Fairport, and I desired to make the journey as quickly as possible."

So he had walked to Chesterfield in the middle of the night! No wonder he had not been seen.

"You made quite a visit on your cousin," I observed, growing brighter every minute.

"I had no intention of visiting Cousin William for more than twenty-four hours," he replied; "but unfortunately I came down with a severe attack of pneumonia, almost upon my arrival at his house. Although I felt it was quite imperative that I should be at home, it was only yesterday that the doctor consented to my departure alone. I have just arrived. I came here directly from the station, thinking that I would immediately give myself the satisfaction of assuring you that the unfortunate error had been corrected. I think you were the only person who knew of the blunder, with the exception of that young man stopping here, who is a stranger to me."

I was just wondering if I ought to tell him that the young man was now in prison, awaiting trial for the murder of Jaquith Gurney, when Mary Andrews appeared, showing in Arthur Rice.

I don't think I shall ever forget the expression on Arthur's face, as he stood there, apparently petrified, and staring blankly at Jaquith Gurney, if I live to be a hundred.

I seemed unable to think of just the right thing to say, never having had experience with a like situation. As Jaquith showed no further inclination for speech, there was a prolonged silence, which was finally broken by Arthur's gasping out:

"Thought you was dead!"

Jaquith looked inquiringly at him.

"We were afraid, Mr. Gurney, that you might have died," I hastened to explain.

Jaquith, looking up with kindly inquiry, still said nothing.

"Hull town thinks you're murdered!" Arthur blurted out.

Then the old man broke his silence.

"Will you be good enough to inform me who is believed to have murdered me?" he inquired mildly.

"Bronson Gurney!" ejaculated Arthur in bewilderment.

Jaquith's tone became more severe.

"You might have been quite positive that such was not the case," he said. "I could not have been murdered by a Gurney, as I am the only one of that name in town—or in the State, I think. Moreover, the Gurneys are not murderers."

"You're right there," put in Arthur, with a gleam of returning sense. "That's what I told 'em from the very start-off of the rumpus!"

(*To be concluded in the March number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

OUR GUIDES

THE sea of doubt is deep and wide,
  And storms are on its breast;
And there is many a treacherous tide,
  And wave with foaming crest.
Of those who sail its darkened waste
  Some perish far from land;
Of death the bitterness some taste
  Upon its rocky strand.

But we who steer by faith's clear chart
  Are haunted by no fear,
Although we see the waters part,
  Although the blast we hear.
We know our course is pointed right,
  That seas cannot o'erwhelm,
For at the masthead hope's alight,
  And love is at the helm!

William Wallace Whitelock

The Confidence Man

THE STORY OF THE GREAT OIL BOOM AT BERRYDALE

By Willis Brindley

THE youthful president of the Berrydale Commercial Club smiled and nodded at old Henry Cole, who had been dozing in the front row of chairs.

"All right, Henry!" he said.

Cole roused himself, lifted his great bulk into a vertical position, took his pipe out of his mouth, and made the motion that he was always called upon to make when a new man had made application for membership in the Commercial Club.

"Mr. President, I move you that the rules be suspended, and the secretary be instructed to cast the unanimous vote of the club to admit to membership Mr. Arthur J. Pitkin."

It was so ordered, and the youthful president called for "a few words from our new member, Mr. Pitkin."

Arthur J. Pitkin, as he rose to speak, contrasted strikingly in appearance with the other club members. While they were plainly—some of them shabbily—dressed, Pitkin gave evidence in his garb of what tailors are pleased to call quiet elegance. While they were, to a man, small town or country products, engaged in retail trade in the village, or in raspberry farming outside of it, Pitkin was clearly of the city.

For one thing, the back of his neck was shaved straight down at the sides. For another, he wore a mustache that did not droop over his mouth, but rather bristled from it in short spikes. He was of medium height, rather thickset, apparently in the early forties.

"Gentlemen, I greatly appreciate this vote of confidence," he said, speaking with the easy fluency that comes from practice. "When your banker, Mr. Cousens, suggested that I should make application for membership in this club, I felt grateful to him. I am sure that I shall feel still more grateful to him when I have come to know you better."

He paused, reached into his right hip pocket, and from a fat wallet drew two new bills. He stepped forward and handed these to the treasurer of the club.

"I think that I heard you say, Mr. Treasurer, that the dues are four dollars a year, payable in advance. I am glad to pay mine promptly. It is the least that I can do to show my appreciation of the confidence you have shown in me by electing me to membership."

There was a clapping of hands at this. Pitkin smiled a wide smile that displayed a mouthful of well-cared-for teeth.

"I am not here to make a speech. It has been an interesting meeting, and a helpful one, but I imagine that you are ready now to adjourn and go to your homes. I would like to say just one word. That word is confidence, and it has been used by me before. I am a great believer in confidence. Confidence is the basis of credit, the bulwark of business. Unless we have confidence in one another, and show this confidence in our daily relations, there can be no progress. If I might venture to make a confession upon such short acquaintance, I would like to say that so frequently do I preach this gospel that I am known among my friends as the confidence man."

Pitkin established himself next day, quite comfortably, in a store building which, until recently, had been occupied by a barber. For this he paid three months' rent in advance, at fifteen dollars a month.

There was a room in front, perhaps fifteen feet wide by twenty deep, with a wash bowl that had been left by the barber. Behind this was a smaller space, partitioned off, with a bathtub in it. The new tenant found an old-fashioned roll top desk at the secondhand store, half a dozen chairs, and a cot bed. With this outfit, and plenty of blankets, he made himself decidedly snug and comfortable.

Charley Dibble, who was an undertaker by profession, but a sign painter for the sake of eating between funerals, painted on the front window the words "Arthur J. Pitkin," and nothing more. Meeting old Henry Cole at the post office, after completing the job, he complained about it.

"That's all he'd let me put on it—just 'Arthur J. Pitkin,' and not another word. 'Well,' I says, 'ain't you goin' to put your business on, too? What's your business?' 'That's my business,' he says, not sassy, exactly, but sort of as if he had quit talkin'. So I told him it would be two dollars, and he pulled out a roll that would choke an elephant and peeled me off one."

"H-m!" said Henry Cole. "That's kind of funny. Guess I'll blow up there, after a bit, and have a talk with him."

On his way to the combination office and residence of Arthur J. Pitkin, old Mr. Cole stopped at the bank, and let Mr. Cousens change a five-dollar bill for him.

"Pretty good meeting of the Commercial Club last night," said Mr. Cousens. "I wouldn't be surprised if young Walker made a good president."

"Yeah—rather think he will. Slick-looking chap you brought up there—that Pitkin! Made a good little speech. Fellow's all right, I suppose?"

Mr. Cousens coughed and leaned as close as he could get without bumping the wicket with his forehead.

"He has excellent credentials — most excellent!"

"H-m! What might his business be?"

"I was not informed. Yes, Mrs. Jones, I'll wait on you. Mr. Cole has finished."

II

After a steady diet of nicotine as served in a pipe, with an occasional treat in the form of a cigar of a brand that has added luster to the name of a bird known for its wisdom, real Cuban tobacco tastes mighty good. Arthur J. Pitkin had a whole box of long, black, oily-looking cigars, and he passed the box, first thing, to Henry Cole. Here was a host worth playing up to! Cole would talk to him about his hobby.

"I was thinking, Mr. Pitkin," he said, and carefully spat into the exact center of a new brass cuspidor, "about what you said last night about confidence. Good little speech, that was! Something to that idea! We'd be better off in a town like this with more confidence in one another. Yes sir!"

Cole stopped, flicked the ash into the center of the cuspidor, held the good cigar at arm's length, and regarded it affectionately. Pitkin said nothing.

"Yes, sir! Take this here deal we had on with the Consolidated Yeast Products Company. You heard about that, of course? No? Well, there was a case where a little more confidence would have brought us a new industry, and what this town needs is industries—pay rolls. These here Consolidated Yeast people wanted to locate here, and started to dicker with old Sim Wiley for that ten-acre piece he owns between the tracks. The deal was getting on all right, too, till somebody spilled the beans that it was Consolidated Yeast that wanted to buy, and then Sim boosted the price to five thousand dollars an acre. Five thousand dollars an acre for stump land—gosh all hemlock!"

Pitkin seemed impressed. Five thousand dollars an acre is an impressing price.

"So the old gentleman wouldn't sell unless he could get five thousand dollars an acre!" he remarked. "Did I meet Mr. Wiley at the Commercial Club last night? What do you figure that piece of land is really worth?"

"No, you didn't meet Sim Wiley at the Commercial Club meeting last night, nor any other night. Not Sim! Sim's rich, but that's no reason why he should spend any money. About his land—why, he got it for fifty dollars an acre on foreclosure. Young fellow came out and tried to make a farm of it; but, shucks, it's too low to raise raspberries, and there's stumps on it thick as cockle burrs on a goat. Of course, it does lie good for an industry—Northern Pacific tracks on one side and Milwaukee tracks on the other, so that it would be easy to run spur tracks on the property and get service from both lines. I guess maybe that land's worth a hundred dollars an acre to anybody that's got nerve enough to clear it and plant it to blackberries. Maybe an industry would pay five hundred dollars an acre for it, but five thousand—gosh all hemlock!"

Old Henry Cole dumped a long ash from his cigar, held what was left of the Havana at arm's length, and regarded it sadly. It would not last much longer.

"You aiming to buy a little land hereabouts, Mr. Pitkin?"

By way of answer, Pitkin reached down into the drawer of his desk, and passed the cigar box.

"Have a fresh cigar, Mr. Cole," he said. "Very glad you called—very glad indeed!"

III

DURING the next few days, Arthur J. Pitkin, in tweed knickerbockers and brown walking boots, was a familiar and conspicuous figure about the streets of Berrydale and in the thickly settled farming country adjacent. One thing that made him conspicuous was the fact that he walked. He resisted all efforts to sell or rent him anything in the way of a motor car.

Upon these walks, Pitkin had a way of stopping often to talk to the country people. He showed an intelligent interest in the berry business, and in the lives of the people who made a modest living from small fruits. He asked many questions with reference to the amount of time it took to care for a small place, and what the women, particularly, found to occupy themselves before and after the berry harvest.

With all this, his business in Berrydale remained a mystery. Small-town folk have a quick curiosity, but not a lasting one. If Pitkin had spent another week or two sitting in his office, handy to the cigar box, and tramping the country, he would have been classed as peculiar but harmless, and would have ceased to be an object of general comment; but it did not turn out that way. Something happened, rather, to bring Pitkin right into the center of the spotlight, and that something was the discovery of oil on the ten-acre piece of stump bottom owned by Simeon Wiley.

Pitkin happened upon Sim one afternoon when the old man was busy with a stump puller. To say that he was busy is putting it mildly; he was engrossed, absorbed, and perspiring.

The stump puller was a hand rig, of the type that is operated by pulling a handle back and forth, oar fashion, the handle operating to turn a drum, which in turn pulls upon a cable. By getting a double hitch, the thing has wonderful power, and the stump just naturally has to come—but not until the operator has almost pulled his stomach from where it is hitched to his backbone, in the operation.

Younger men than Simeon Wiley have tackled land clearing with a hand stump puller, and have given up the occupation for something genteel, like check raising, which leads a man to some easier work, such as making shoes in a penitentiary.

Coming upon a little creek, made by a tiny spring, Pitkin sat down to rest from his walk, and watched old Sim pull at the oar. Tiring of the show, he watched the creek, which, at this point, had overflowed to make a boggy little pond. Presently old Sim, who had heard about this stranger, but who had not heretofore had a chance for a close inspection of him, unkinked his back, left the stump puller in gear, and came down to sit on the bank.

"Gosh all hemlock, but that's hard work!" he said.

Pitkin nodded in agreement. It evidently was.

"You aiming to settle hereabouts?"

By way of answer, Pitkin drew from a coat pocket a leather case stuffed with black cigars, and handed it to Sim, who gingerly removed one, bit the end off, struck a match on his overalls, and lighted up.

"Pretty fancy cigar!" Puff, puff! "How much does a cigar like this cost, do you suppose?"

"Twenty cents." Pitkin was looking hard at the water in the boggy pond.

"Twenty cents! That's interest for four years on a dollar. What you see so interesting in that bog?"

Pitkin continued to look, his eyes directed at the far edge, where moss hung over the dead water.

"Why, it looks to me like oil. Has there ever been any oil found in this section?"

"Oil! Oil! Gosh all hemlock!"

With an agility surprising in a man of his years, old Sim slid down the bank, splashed through the little stream, and lay flat on his stomach, to get a close look at the place which had attracted Pitkin's attention. There was undoubtedly a cloudy scum on the surface of the water. Wiley looked at it long and hard, dabbled his hand in it, and then came back and sat on the bank again, beside the stranger.

For some moments neither man spoke. Old Sim Wiley took off his hat and polished the shiny dome of his head with a large blue handkerchief. For good measure, he wiped his forehead and the back of his neck.

Then he looked again at the spot in the bog where the oily scum was clearly visible. He puckered his forehead in heavy thought. He glanced sidewise at the city chap beside him—who, if he observed this scrutiny, paid no heed to Sim, but continued to smoke contemplatively.

Finally Sim cleared his throat and gave utterance to a pertinent question:

"I don't suppose you planted this here stuff with an oil can, or something, eh?"

"No."

And then, after another silence:

"You ain't ever seen it before, or told anybody about it?"

"No."

"And there ain't no cause for you to tell anybody about it?"

"No."

"All right, then! I guess the thing for me to do next is to start digging an oil well. It does beat the Dutch — one minute a man's bustin' his back grubbin' out stumps, and next minute he's a millionaire."

Pitkin smiled at this.

"I think you'll find, Mr. Wiley, that it is quite a distance from the sight of oil on a pond to the spending of a millionaire's income. There may be no oil, except what you see on the pond. Digging for oil means employing men who know the trade, and arranging for expensive machinery. It probably will cost you fifty thousand dollars to find out whether you really have oil. Suppose we stroll back to Berrydale, and have a talk with Mr. Cousens at the bank?"

The idea of talking to Mr. Cousens, or anybody else, did not at first appeal to Sim Wiley; but by frequent reiteration of his opinion that fifty thousand dollars would be required for the project, Pitkin finally won his point.

There followed a long conference with Mr. Cousens, in his little room at the back of the bank. The conference made progress and adjourned for dinner, and then resumed for the afternoon.

Out of it all resulted an agreement, drawn up in the best style of Attorney Lawrence Ellis, whereby Arthur J. Pitkin and associates contracted to sink a well, and, if oil were struck, to pay Simeon Wiley, as his share, one-fourth of all the oil. At the last moment Sim had one more idea, and succeeded in getting into the agreement a clause whereby Pitkin and associates, in the event of their failure to strike oil, would buy the ten-acre property for five hundred dollars an acre.

IV

MURDER will out, as the proverb says. Almost anything will out in a small town, and oil will out about as promptly as anything else.

When Arthur J. Pitkin returned to his combination office and dwelling, he found a small crowd gathered in front of his door. They followed him in — old Henry Cole, Charley Dibble, the young Mr. Walker, who had presided at the Commercial Club; Harvey Bemis, from the People's Store, and half a dozen others. Cole came to the point at once.

"We want to know what there is to this story that oil has been found on Sim Wiley's stump bottom," he declared.

"Mr. Wiley and I discovered oil seepage," Pitkin told him.

They looked at one another, coughed behind their hands, shuffled their feet, and fingered their hats. Pitkin did not ask them to sit down. Finally Cole spoke again.

"Well, Mr. Pitkin, this is big news. I guess that I speak for the rest of us here in saying that if there's going to be an oil well in this neighborhood, we all want to be in on it, on any terms that are fair."

Pitkin smiled a bit at that. He motioned them to seats, stepped to the door, locked it, and brought forth his box of twenty-cent cigars.

"Here is all there is to this, gentlemen—Mr. Wiley and I discovered oil seepage on his place this morning. We have decided to drill a well, and I am to put up the money, with any associates whom I care to take in with me. If oil is discovered, Mr. Wiley is to get every fourth barrel for his share. If oil is not discovered, and the project is abandoned, I agree to pay Mr. Wiley five hundred dollars an acre for his land. The project will take about fifty thousand dollars—I mean, the average well costs that much before oil is struck—and if any of you want a share, up to one-half of the total, I am willing to let you in. Is it clear so far?"

They nodded. It was. If anybody wondered about security for his money, his fears were dissipated by what Pitkin said next.

"I propose to handle this by organizing the Berrydale Development Company, with a capital of fifty thousand dollars. I have deposited twenty-five thousand dollars in the bank for my half of it, and each of you may deposit as much as he pleases, except that the total must not exceed twenty-five thousand dollars. Mr. Cousens, at the bank, will give each of you a receipt for his money, this to be exchanged for stock when the incorporation of the company has been completed."

"Who's going to run it?" asked Henry Cole.

The others nodded. This was important.

"The papers provide that the management of the project shall be in the hands of Mr. Wiley, Mr. Cousens, and myself. Is that satisfactory to you all?"

They nodded. It was. With two local men on a board of three, the town ought to get a square deal. By noon of the next day Mr. Cousens, at the bank, had taken in twenty-five thousand dollars in hard cash, and the books of the Berrydale Development Company were closed. Pitkin took a trip to the city to talk to well drillers.

Berrydale, of course, seethed with excitement. The seepage in Sim Wiley's stump lot was duly inspected by pretty nearly the entire population. Sim himself stood guard, most of the time, as if to prevent any one stealing oil, and his stump puller hung in the air, suspended between stumps.

In due course there arrived much machinery, some heavy lumber, and some men who chewed tobacco, wore blue flannel shirts, and were undoubtedly expert at drilling. A great derrick rose, as in the pictures of oil fields familiar to moving picture patrons, and a walking beam began its persistent up and down performance. This continued so steadily that the average citizen, viewing it, was convinced that such a rig might be depended upon, if necessary, to drill clear through to China in its relentless search for oil.

Of course, here and there were scoffers—as, for example, one Billy Dobson, janitor at the bank, who asserted that the rig didn't look like an oil rig to him. He had seen a lot of oil rigs, he said, during a visit to a daughter who had married an Oklahoma operator.

For the most part, however, the performance going on in Sim Wiley's stump lot gave complete satisfaction. The experts who wore blue flannel shirts and chewed tobacco were a decent enough lot. They were very chary of information, however, refusing to let anybody get inside the fence which had been built around the works, and positively declining to make any estimates as to when oil would be struck, or as to how big a well it would prove to be.

Finally there came a day when there was a definite development, when something was struck.

That something was water—a big head of water that spouted out of the hole to the top of the derrick. When this happened, the men with blue flannel shirts were seen to get very busy indeed, being apparently engaged in drawing from the casing the drill which had bored the hole. Then they hitched an elbow of pipe to the top of the well casing, and attached to this several lengths of pipe, so as to throw the water into a concrete reservoir which had been built a short distance from the well.

All of this, as explained by Henry Cole and Charley Dibble and the others, who had been wising up on such things, meant simply that they were getting ready to remove the water, with a view to further boring for oil. They were a little vague about details, but their cocksureness passed for knowledge with the crowd.

The men with blue flannel shirts called it a day, and everybody went home. Next day there seemed to be nothing much doing at the well, and the next day the same. The drillers seemed to have left town.

It occurred to somebody to make inquiry from Arthur J. Pitkin, but Pitkin's door was locked. Mr. Cousens, at the bank, didn't know anything about it, and Sim Wiley, in spite of the fact that he was supposed to be one of the three managers, was clearly up in the air.

Saturday passed, and Sunday. On Monday morning it was seen that Pitkin's shade was up, and that he himself was sitting inside, calm as you please, at his old-fashioned desk, smoking one of his twenty-cent cigars.

Old Henry Cole and Charley Dibble called on him. He was reading a newspaper when they entered, and did not look up for a moment. Then, when he saw that he had visitors, he reached for the cigar box; but Cole and Dibble had not come for a smoke. They waved away his offer and faced him, grim-visaged and earnest.

"We would like to know, Mr. Pitkin, whether everything is all right at the well," said Henry Cole.

"Oh, quite," said Pitkin.

"Well, if that's so, then what's the idea in the men going away, and—"

"And me going away."

Pitkin smiled, but there was no warmth in his smile. It was the sort of smile that a banker uses in greeting a borrower before advising him that a further extension of his loan will not be allowed.

"You men are entitled to know the truth, of course. I suggest that you pass the word around to all those who have invested their money in the project we jointly undertook, advising them that there will be a meeting in this room at eight o'clock to-night."

Arthur J. Pitkin resumed the reading of his newspaper, and Henry Cole and Charley Dibble departed. They would have preferred to know the truth, however unpleasant, right then and there, but Pitkin's manner forbade further questions.

V

THEY were all present at eight o'clock—Henry Cole, Charley Dibble, young Walker, the president of the Commercial Club, Billy Dobson, Mr. Cousens of the bank, Sim Wiley, and an assortment of citizens who had put their money into this thing. They wanted to know the truth. They had very grave doubts about this sleek Arthur J. Pitkin, and they had arranged with the night marshal to take his post at the rear of the building, while a deputy sheriff lounged carelessly on the sidewalk in front.

"Before I tell you how we stand in this matter," said Pitkin, "I want to remind you that I was vouched for by Mr. Cousens when I first came to Berrydale, and that I was unanimously elected to membership in the Commercial Club. I will also remind you that when I talked to the club for a few minutes, my subject was confidence. I remarked that confidence was the basis of credit, the bulwark of business. I might have said then what I propose to say now—that lack of confidence, especially as shown in small communities, has killed many worthy projects, while overconfidence has resulted in the loss of savings by persons who could ill afford such loss.

"The Consolidated Yeast Products Company came to Berrydale, proposing to establish an industry which would give employment to many persons, and would help the business of your merchants. You were suspicious, rather than confident, in your dealings with the emissaries of the company. You allowed the owner of a piece of stump land to ask a price ten times as high as the most liberal estimate of its worth for a manufacturing site. And then, a few weeks later, the same people turned over their savings to a highly speculative project, joining up in this venture with a man who was an entire stranger to them. And now—"

But he got no further. The big voice of old Henry Cole boomed a question that was on everybody's lips:

"That's all right, but we didn't come here to hear a speech. What we want to know is, where's the oil?"

"There isn't any oil. There never was any oil."

Instantly the place was in an uproar. Everybody shouted at once, and everybody shook his fist at the speaker—that is, everybody but Mr. Cousens, of the bank. Mr. Cousens climbed upon the desk and demanded that they should hear what Pitkin had to say. When it was quiet enough, Pitkin proceeded, unruffled, calm, deliberate.

"The first few days of my stay in your community were devoted to a study of the neighborhood. I found that you were a decent, home-loving people, occupied for the most part in the raising of small fruits—the kind of folks that any industry would be glad to welcome as employees and stockholders. Mr. Wiley's stump land lay excellently for our purpose, between two railroad tracks, and my problem was to figure some way to acquire it at a reasonable price. With no definite plan in mind, but knowing from what I had been told about him that it would be impossible to trade with him openly and frankly, as I would have preferred, I called upon him. The discovery of a trifle of oil seepage, and the subsequent excitement, gave me the answer to my problem, and you know the rest."

"We don't know the rest," said Henry Cole; "and particularly we don't know what's happened to our money!"

"All right—I'll tell you. The Consolidated Yeast Products Company intends to establish a yeast plant on the property of Mr. Wiley. Mr. Wiley will recall that he made me agree to pay him five hundred dollars an acre for his land in case of failure to discover oil. What we discovered, instead of oil, was artesian water of a purity that makes it satisfactory for use in the manufacture of yeast. I had to assure myself on this point before I could buy the land from Mr. Wiley. The analysis—made last week, while you thought that I had run away from you—established the fitness of the water for our project. As for your money, it is safe in Mr. Cousens's bank. Each of you may have it back, with interest; or, if you prefer, I am authorized by the company to sell you stock at par, which is about twenty points below the market price. We will do this for the sake of acquiring the good will of local people; and I personally, as resident manager, shall be glad to have my friends and neighbors interested in Berrydale's new industry."

"All right, Mr. Pitkin!" said Henry Cole. "I'll buy yeast stock with my money; but there's just one thing I'd like to know, and that is, if there was oil showing, why didn't your well strike oil?"

Pitkin smiled. This time there was warmth in his smile.

"There are three things that this community has had a chance to learn from our recent experience. The first is the value of mutual confidence and fair dealing. The second is that pure water is necessary in the manufacture of yeast. The third is that about the best evidence that there is no oil to be discovered on a property is the fact that oil seepage is noted. If there is oil at the surface, it indicates that the formation is such as to have prevented oil formation below the surface."

A Big Day

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A FLIVVER THAT WAS WORTH AT LEAST A MILLION DOLLARS

By William Slavens McNutt

HERBERT HATHAWAY marched into the bank, stepped up to the paying teller's window, and asked the amount of his balance.

"Two hundred and one dollars and fifty-eight cents," the teller informed him.

Herbert wrote out a check for two hundred and one dollars and fifty-eight cents, and passed it in.

"Closing out your account?" the teller inquired.

"I am," Herbert said emphatically. "So help me, I'll never have another one as long as I live!"

He went from the bank to the Brevoort Hotel and called on Bob Folwell, a young sculptor, who had just returned to New York after two years in Europe.

"Still looking for a studio?" Herbert asked.

"Yes."

"You can have mine."

Folwell was surprised.

"You moving?" he asked.

"You bet your life I'm moving!" Herbert replied savagely.

"What's the matter?"

"Everything," Herbert said bitterly. "Oh, not with the studio. It's all right. The trouble is with me."

"What's happened?"

"Nothing—that's the trouble. Nothing ever happens to me."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I live and breathe and sleep, and nothing happens. Might as well be a vegetable. The trouble with me is that my system's wrong."

"Run down?"

"I don't mean that kind of system. I mean my system for getting ahead in the world—or, rather, for standing absolutely still in the world."

"Oh, you have a system!"

"No — I had one," Herbert corrected him. "I had one until this morning. This morning I quit it."

"Go wrong on you?"

"It was wholly wrong from the beginning," Herbert said gloomily. "If I hadn't been such a persistent damn fool, I'd have chucked it years ago. You may possibly have noticed, Bob, that I lead a peculiarly regular life."

"I know that you're not famous for hitting the high spots."

"No! That's my system—not to hit the high spots. Believe me, I haven't hit them. The trouble is that I not only don't hit them in dissipation, but I don't hit them anywhere else, either. You see, Bob, I read a book once."

"No—really?"

"Don't try to be funny. Away back when I was about sixteen, I fully decided that I'd go in for sculpture. It was then that I read this damnable book. I suppose it wouldn't have made such a deep impression on me, except that everybody had been trying to dissuade me from taking up art by telling me how hard it is to succeed at it. This fool book was all about how to succeed."

"Told you just what to do, eh?"

"It didn't have much about 'do' in it—it was mostly 'don't.' Don't drink; don't smoke; don't stay up late; don't do this, and don't do that. There were a few 'do's' in it, such as taking cold baths every morning and working like the devil. I read that book and fell for it.

"'Herbert,' I said to myself, 'very few, if any, of the young sculptors with whom you'll have to compete will know enough, or have will power enough, to follow the rules laid down in this book. If you follow them, you can't lose. You'll have an advantage over the rest of the fellows that 'll be sure to tell in time.'

"So I began not doing nearly everything I wanted to do, and doing nearly everything I didn't want to do. I've done them and not done them ever since. I'm twenty-nine years old, and I've missed enough fun since I read that fool book to make a Michelangelo out of a hod carrier, if missing a lot of fun had anything to do with it. And the cold baths I've taken! *Brrr!* Do you take cold baths?"

"I fell in the lake last spring."

"You did yourself just as much good falling in the lake last spring as I have taking those confounded cold baths every morning of my life. The book said you got used to them in time. Damn that book! I followed its rules religiously, in spite of the fact that I lost out, time and again, in competition with other fellows who did everything wrong but their work. In spite of it all, I stuck to the system until this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"You know Jason D. Batwood?"

"I've heard of him."

"Got all the money in the world, and thinks he's a judge of sculpture. Got so much dough that people who know better let him keep on thinking so. He's always serving on committees that judge stuff and award commissions. Of course he can generally be shaken down for a good share of the price of a piece of work, if he's been properly flattered by being allowed to pick it out."

"I've heard that."

"You've heard right. Did you ever read the *Here's How Magazine?*"

"I don't think so."

"It's a periodical equivalent to that book that ruined my life. You know—'How I Stole a Million Dollars and Got Away With It,' 'How to Beat the Cash Register and Get a Business of Your Own,' and all that. Whenever a man gets more than he can ever spend, he writes an article for the *Here's How,* telling how he did it. That's the general idea."

"Sure guide to riches, eh?"

"That's it. Well, a couple of months ago I was working hard on a model for that Baxter War Memorial, and I happened to see an article in the *Here's How* by Jason D. Batwood, explaining how he became rich and famous. According to what he wrote in that article, he had followed exactly the same system that I had. His story might have been a digest of the book that I've lived by so long. He said that this wonderful and infallible system had made him, and that he had no faith in the future career of any young man who didn't follow it.

"'Well!' I said to myself. 'Here's where I get a chance to cash in at last on the awful sufferings I've endured all these years!'

"I knew that the model I was doing for the Baxter Memorial was a good piece of work, and that all I needed to get the job was a little influence in the committee. I knew that Jason D. Batwood was the real power on that committee; so I went after him. I framed it to meet him at a tea at Harrison's studio one afternoon. I got the old codger to myself for half an hour, and pumped him full of propaganda to the eyebrows."

"How do you mean? You told him what a good boy you'd been all your life?"

"Something like that. I didn't mention having read his article, of course, but I told him in detail of the strict way I'd lived."

"Was he interested?"

"Was he? I'll say so. He asked me a lot of questions about myself, and time and again he exclaimed: 'Most unusual!' or

'Remarkable!' or 'Very interesting—very!' When he left, he said to me: 'Mr. Hathaway, I'm very much interested in what you've told me about yourself. I shall be further interested in noting the result of your experiment. It's most unusual for an artist.'"

"That must have sounded pretty good, coming from Jason D. Batwood," Folwell commented.

"It did. It sounded fine. I was sure he'd remember my name when he saw my model for the Baxter Memorial. Then he'd say to himself: 'Well! So this is the work of the young man who follows the same system that made me a great man!' I knew the model I was submitting was a good piece of work. Don't you think I had a right to believe that Batwood would be prejudiced in my favor when he saw it?"

"Sounds logical."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I met Williston Condax on the street this morning. He's one of the members of the committee that is to award the commission for the Baxter Memorial. They don't take the final vote until the formal meeting to-morrow night, but they've already decided who's to get the job. Condax told me in confidence."

"From your manner, I take it they are not going to give it to you."

"They are not. They are going to give it to Martin Rumsey. It was a toss-up between him and me. At one time every one on the committee was in favor of my model, except Batwood."

"Batwood?"

"Yes, Batwood—the idiotic old sap! Do you know why he wouldn't stand for my model? He said that he'd met and talked to me, and that I was such a colorless person, and led such a drab, uneventful life, that he was absolutely certain I lacked the ability to do anything with a real punch in it. He knew that I lacked the spark, as he called it. Spark! What does he think I am—a car, or a motor boat, or something? Can you beat that? The one man in the world who ought to appreciate the way I've worked and disciplined myself turns me down just because I've done the very things that he says a man ought to do to succeed. I'm through!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Everything that I never have done. I've always kept a bank account, and always kept my balance above the two hundred dollars that they require. I've just drawn out the last cent of my deposit. I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but it's going to be something foolish. I've always had a studio—a good place to sleep and work. Move in. It's yours. The rent's paid up to yesterday. Help yourself to all that you find!"

"But, Herbert, what are you going to do?"

"If I knew what I'm going to do, it wouldn't be sufficiently different from the system to suit me. Just now I'm going to bid you good morning and walk out of that door. When I get outside, I don't know whether I'm going north, south, east, or west. Whichever direction I choose, I won't know why. Good-by!"

II

THERE was nothing suggestive of desperation in Herbert Hathaway's appearance or manner as he left the Brevoort, walked west on Ninth Street to Sixth Avenue, and turned north. A stranger taking note of him would have noticed only a slender, passably good-looking, fairly well dressed young fellow of medium height enjoying a stroll in the pleasant warmth of the early summer sun. No casual observer would have been able to read in Herbert's face any record of the rebellious emotions running riot in his breast. No passer-by would have guessed that he had seen a young man who had just cut himself adrift on the ocean of life, after tossing away his rudder and all his navigating instruments—a young man who didn't give a continental what happened to him, so long as something did.

Near the corner of Thirteenth Street Herbert saw a man standing in the gutter, in the immediate rear of a flivver, wrestling with an inharmonious combination of tire iron, demountable rim, and stiff shoes. As Herbert came near, the tire iron slipped, and the man skinned his fingers on the curbstone.

Herbert stopped and listened admiringly to the stranger's profane comments on tire irons, flivvers, and fools who had anything to do with either.

"I'll give you a hand," said Herbert.

"Thanks," said the man. "I need it. I need lots of hands and some more feet, and enough luck to make this tin disease run as far as the nearest secondhand shop where they buy these things!"

A newborn baby idea began kicking and wriggling in Herbert's mind.

"Do you really want to sell it?" he asked.

"No," the man said solemnly. "What I really want to do is to get a sledge hammer and beat this crime until I can sweep it up with a broom and brush it into the bay. That's what I want to do, but I can't afford it. I bought the darned thing, and paid money for it, so I've got to sell it and get my money back; but next to wanting to smash it up I want to sell it worse than anything I can think of just at the present moment."

The idea in Herbert's mind grew rapidly into a lusty sum of thoughts, inoculating him with various wild dreams and desires, all of which had something to do with his ownership of a flivver. He saw himself a happy vagabond in an animated tin can, roving wantonly across a purpling desert in pursuit of a westering sun; chugging up steep trails; whirling down mountain highways with a snow-capped peak above him and a dizzy cañon below; squatting over a camp fire by the roadside, and sleeping out under the stars.

"How much do you want for it?" he asked, a tremor of eagerness in his voice.

A sharp light came into the man's eyes, but it faded out again as he looked at Herbert.

"No," he said regretfully. "It's a temptation, but you're a good scout. You stopped and offered to help me. It wouldn't be fair to sell it to you after you did me a favor."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. The only trouble is that it is what it is. For what it is, it's as good as any of them, I guess."

"It runs, doesn't it?"

"The blamed things all run," the man replied. "That's one thing about them. They rattle and jolt and rust and come apart, but they do run."

"How much do you want for it?"

The man considered.

"It cost me three hundred and twenty-five dollars, and it's just as good now as when I got it. I'll sell it for three hundred. It's worth twenty-five to me not to own it."

Herbert sighed.

"A little too steep for me," he said. "Well, good luck!"

He started to walk away. The man grabbed him by the arm.

"Wait a minute! Do you really want to buy the thing? How much are you willing to pay for it?"

"I'm willing to pay two hundred and one dollars and fifty-eight cents," Herbert said.

"That's a weird sum!"

"That's just what I've got."

The man took a long breath.

"Then that's just what I'll sell this car for. Got the money with you?"

Herbert nodded.

"Give it to me. I'll write you a bill of sale, and go my way. You take Lizzie by the arm and go yours. If we ever meet again in this world, don't you throw it up to me!"

III

The stranger was right. The flivver ran. It rattled and groaned and creaked, but it ran.

Seated at the wheel without a cent in his pocket, and with only the dimmest glimmer of an idea as to where he was going and what he was going to do on the way there, Herbert was supremely, wantonly happy. Not a worry disturbed the exalted serenity of his mind. He thought he would probably drive through to the Pacific coast, but the thought did not bother him. There was no reason why he should drive through to the coast, so there was nothing to worry about if he didn't. Then, again, there was no reason why he should *not* drive through to the coast if he wanted to, and, in consequence, he did not want to badly enough to worry about not being able to make it. He was perfectly, gloriously happy.

On a hill in the outskirts of Peekskill, some thirty-five miles from New York, the flivver stopped running. Herbert got out and looked at the engine. A brother flivverite slowed down and asked him what the trouble was.

"Got gas?" he asked.

Herbert plumbed the tank with a stick, and grinned foolishly.

"That's it," he admitted. "Bone dry!"

"Garage about three blocks down. Hop in, and I'll ride you there."

Herbert was about to hop in when he remembered. He remembered that he didn't have a cent to his name. Garages, he knew, were not in the habit of passing out free gas to unknown transients.

"Just a moment," he said. "Be right with you."

He went foraging under the back seat, and came up with a set of skid chains in good condition. Money, he reflected, was not everything, after all. There were skid chains, for example. Any garage ought to be glad to get a set of four good chains in return for five gallons of gas.

Of course, five gallons of gas would not last indefinitely, and he was reasonably certain that there was not another set of chains in the car. He found himself beginning to worry about what he would do when he had to get gas again. The moment he found out that he was worrying, he grinned and hummed a tune. Worrying was one of the things he was not going to do.

He found the garage man willing to make the exchange—five gallons of gas for one set of chains.

As the garage man started to pump the gas, it occurred to Herbert that he might as well stop in Peekskill and eat. Then it occurred to him, further, that unless he got some money, he might as well just stop.

The garage man had just pumped in the second gallon.

" Wait a minute," said Herbert. " How much do you get for your gas here?"

" Thirty-one cents."

" Would you just as soon make that three gallons of gas and fifty cents in money?"

" I guess so—sure!" The garage man grinned. " I guess you're a little short of ready cash, ain't you?"

Herbert grinned back.

" You're a mind reader. How else did you guess it?"

He pocketed the fifty-cent piece, fed Lizzie her three-gallon ration of gas, and rattled gayly up the street to a restaurant in the center of town.

IV

After eating fifty cents' worth of food, Herbert strolled out of the restaurant, dead broke, but happy. When he reached the sidewalk, his heart skipped a beat, and a frantic flock of cold shivers stampeded up and down his spine. His flivver was gone!

He looked to the right and then looked to the left. When he looked to the left, he let out a yell and began to run. The flivver was just turning the corner a few yards away. A girl was driving it.

Sprinting desperately, he caught up to the car within half a block, clutched at the folded top, jumped, and drew himself in, with his legs kicking out behind and his hands resting on the back seat.

" Hey! What's the idea?" he shouted.

The girl turned and gave a little scream. The flivver yawed over to the curbstone and came to a bumpy stop.

Herbert had some choice profanity ready for use, but he forgot about it when he saw the girl. There was something about her dark blue eyes, and about the way in which her bright hair was arranged, that interested Herbert and made him want to be nice.

" I beg your pardon," he said, " but you're stealing my Ford!"

" I beg your pardon," the girl returned stoutly, " but this is my Ford. If you are the man who stole it, I must say you have a nerve to face me in broad daylight like this on a busy street!"

Hathaway frowned.

" Awfully sorry, but there's a mistake somewhere. This really is my Ford. I bought it only to-day in New York, and I have a bill of sale for it."

" I think I ought to know my own Ford," the girl argued. " I just drove it all the way from Wisconsin, and it was stolen from me right here in Peekskill only yesterday afternoon!"

" You say you just drove through from Wisconsin?" Hathaway asked.

" Yes."

" Have you a Wisconsin license?"

" I have. The number is 38,642."

" If you'll be good enough to get out and look, you'll see that this car has a New York license, No. 228,756," Hathaway said triumphantly.

He stepped out and held the door open for the girl. She ignored the proffered aid of his hand, stalked around to the rear of the car, and looked at the license plate. What she saw was a New York license plate bearing the number mentioned.

" I suppose you changed the license after you stole it," she suggested.

The accusation hurt Herbert's feelings.

" Do you really think I am a thief?" he asked sadly.

She looked at him and shook her head.

" I don't know what to think," she said in a bewildered tone. " I know this is my car. There's the dent I made in the mud guard when I ran into a truck at Schenectady. There's the place where I scraped the running board when I skidded into a fence in Ohio. There's that broken strap on the top." She walked around to the front of the car, and nodded. "And there—I knew it! See that cracked glass in the headlight? I did that one night when I hit a lamp-post in Buffalo. Now will you go away and leave me and my Ford alone?"

"I wish I could, but I can't," Hathaway protested. "This Ford's all I've got in the world."

The girl glanced at the little knot of people gathered on the sidewalk, listening to the argument. She stamped her foot.

"We can't stand here and quarrel about this," she said. "People are beginning to notice. Pretty soon we'll have a crowd, and then a policeman will come, and you'll be arrested!"

"That's my Ford," Hathaway insisted stubbornly. "I bought it and paid for it, and it's mine."

"If you don't let me go at once, I'll call a policeman," the girl threatened.

"Why call one? Drive to the police station, and we'll settle this thing."

"I don't want to send any one to jail," she said. "I just want my Ford back. I've given you every chance to get away, and if you won't take it—"

She climbed back into the driver's seat. Hathaway inquired the way to the police station from a man standing on the curb, and got into the back seat. The girl drove to the station and stopped. She sat in the front seat, waiting. Hathaway sat in the back seat, doing the same thing.

"Well!" said Hathaway. "Why don't you get out and have me arrested?"

"Why don't you go away and leave me alone?" she countered.

"I want my Ford," Hathaway explained.

A policeman came out of the front door of the station and crossed the sidewalk to the car.

"Did you want to speak to some one?" he asked.

The girl stepped viciously on the starter.

"No," she said. "Thank you, but it's nothing, I just stalled my engine."

She drove for several blocks and then slowed up.

"Will you please get out and go away?" she begged.

Hathaway shook his head.

"I can't. You don't know what this Ford means to me."

She gave an exclamation and drove on. She drove out of town and for a couple of miles along a country road. Then she stopped, and suddenly began to cry.

"Don't cry—don't!" Hathaway begged. "Please! What's the matter?"

"I'm tired," she sobbed, "and I'm scared, and I'm hungry. Most of all I'm hungry!"

"Well, let's go back to town and get something to eat."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know why I sit here and talk like this to a—a—"

"A thief?"

"You're not a thief, are you?"

"No. I bought this car in town to-day from a man on the street, and paid him two hundred and one dollars and fifty-eight cents for it. I suppose it is your car. He probably stole it, and changed the license plate on it. Anyhow, I'm not a thief. I'm a sculptor."

"Oh, are you, really? I'm an artist, too—that is, I'm a sort of a one. I want to be an artist."

"That's the sort of artist I am—a want-to-be-one."

"And you're from New York?"

"About forty miles from there, according to the signpost I saw a little way back."

"I paint a little," the girl confessed. "I studied all I could in Oshkosh. I wanted to come to New York, but I could never get enough money. Then Uncle Ed died, and left me his Ford, and I made up my mind to come as far as I could in it, and then sell it. I meant to try and sell it in Peekskill yesterday, but somebody stole it."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure it's your car. You can have it. The first thing for you to do is to go back to town and get something to eat."

"But I can't."

"Why not?"

"I haven't a cent of money," she admitted. "I meant to sell the car yesterday for enough to go on into New York and get started. After it was stolen, I spent my last cent for dinner and a room at the hotel."

"Oh, that's all right," Herbert began largely. He stopped. It was not all right. He had just remembered. "I'm flat broke, too," he confessed miserably.

Rapidly he sketched the story of his plight.

"Oh! And you spent your last cent for this car!"

"That's all right. The question is, how are we going to get you something to eat?"

"I know!" she exclaimed. "There's a full set of perfectly good skid chains under the back seat. We'll see if we can't sell them to some garage in town for enough to get—"

"You don't know how unutterably miserable you make me," he cried. "I sold those chains in town for three gallons of gas and enough money for my own lunch. I'm so sorry!"

"Oh, I'm not hungry," she insisted weakly. "Not—not very."

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "Pardon me, but that's what I mean—damn! Let me think."

V

WHILE Hathaway was thinking, a car slowed down and stopped in the road behind them, and two determined-looking men got out of it and approached. There was a menace in their manner.

The girl gave an exclamation of fright and started the Ford. The two men called on her to stop, and ran to catch the flivver. She gave it the gas and pulled away from them.

Hathaway shouted a warning as the two men drew guns and fired. He heard the whine of a bullet overhead and the smack of another tearing into the rear of the car.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

"They must be officers after you," she replied. "I reported that my car was stolen. Are they gaining?"

He looked back.

"Their car seems to be stalled," he said. "Why run away from them? We can explain matters."

"I'm afraid they'll take you to jail," she said.

Hathaway felt strangely pleased.

"Don't you want them to take me to jail?"

She did not answer this.

"Look back, and see if they are gaining," she directed him.

Hathaway looked.

"They've got started now," he said. "They're nearly a quarter of a mile back, but they'll catch us, sure. You mustn't take such a risk. They're liable to shoot you by mistake!"

A bend in the road hid them from the pursuing car. A few yards farther along a small side road turned off to the left. The girl took the turn on two wheels.

The side road curved sharply to the right through a thick wood. Just at the bend, on the left hand side, there was an entrance to an estate. Without slacking speed, the girl whirled the car to the left and shot in between the stone pillars of the open gate.

The private road twisted up along a little ravine, amid a dense growth of trees. Within ten seconds they were out of sight of any one on the road below. Hathaway heard the pursuing car, with its cut-out open, go thundering past.

The speeding Ford veered sharply to the right, and the girl screamed as it pitched over the edge of the road and started down the side of the ravine.

She was desperately twisting the wheel that a broken steering knuckle had rendered useless. As the car lunged down, Hathaway leaned forward and took her in his arms. He saw a tree immediately ahead. He heard and felt a fearful crash. He was conscious of sailing helplessly through space; then, for a time, he was conscious of nothing.

VI

WHEN Hathaway returned to consciousness, the girl was holding his head in her lap. She was crying.

"Are you hurt?" he asked weakly.

"N-no," she sobbed. "I'm all right. Oh, I thought you were dead!"

Herbert sat up and tested himself. His limbs functioned satisfactorily until he attempted to get to his feet. Then he found that his right ankle was done for. He sank back to the ground, groaning.

"Is it broken?" the girl asked tearfully.

"I don't think so," Herbert said. "Just sprained. I can't bear my weight on it, though."

He sat up and looked about him. The car, upside down, a few yards distant, was a total loss. Scattered everywhere among the parts that strewed the ground were slips of yellow paper about the size of a large business envelope. There were hundreds of them. They lay as thick as autumn leaves under a spreading oak.

Herbert picked one of them up and looked at it. It was a thousand-dollar Liberty bond.

"Good God!" he said.

He picked up another. It was also a thousand-dollar Liberty bond. He picked up another and another. They were all the same.

He passed one to the girl.

"Why, it's a bond!" she said. "It's a thousand-dollar Liberty bond!"

"They're all thousand-dollar Liberty bonds," Hathaway told her, in an awed voice.

"Are they yours?" she asked.

"Mine? I never had a thousand dollars in my life!"

"Where did they come from?"

"They came out of that Ford," Hathaway said, pointing to the wreck. "Look at them—hundreds of them! Why, there must be a million dollars' worth of them!"

"A million dollars' worth of them!" the girl repeated. "Whose are they?"

"They're not mine, anyhow," Hathaway said regretfully.

"And they're not mine," the girl agreed. "How did they get into our—I mean your—that is, my—the Ford?"

Hathaway shook his head.

"I don't know how they got in there, but I know how they got out—the same way we did, when Lizzie hit the tree. Say, do you know that we're just about as safe here, with all these Liberty bonds, as we would be on a battlefield? Can you walk?"

The girl nodded.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm not hurt a bit."

"Well, there must be a house on up this road somewhere. It's probably a rich man's country home, and the chances are that the people you'll find there are not the sort who'd murder us, even for all this money. Don't be satisfied with the servants. Get some of the family, and get back here just as quickly as you can."

When the girl returned, after ten minutes' absence, she was accompanied by a number of men, prominent among whom was Jason D. Batwood.

"Why, Mr. Batwood!" Herbert exclaimed, in some surprise.

Batwood paid not the slightest attention to either Herbert or his exclamation. He paid attention to nothing except the bonds strewn about on the ground. He went after those bonds like a lean coyote after a trapped jack rabbit, like a show girl after a new fur coat, like a thirsty American after a drink. He got down on his knees and crawled around among them, picked up and avidly inspected one after another, all the while muttering intensely, albeit inaudibly, to himself.

At last he rose, threw up his hands, and shouted aloud:

"These are the ones! Glory, hallelujah! I think they're all here! Glory be!"

"Why, Mr. Batwood!" Herbert exclaimed again.

Batwood heard him. This time he saw and recognized the young sculptor.

"Hathaway!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came in the Ford," Herbert explained.

"Where the devil did you get those bonds?"

"I didn't get them," Hathaway said. "They came in the Ford, too."

"Mr. Hathaway," Batwood said impressively, "one of my messengers ran away with these bonds three days ago. There is more than a million dollars' worth of them. We have avoided publicity in the matter thus far, but hundreds of detectives are scouring the Atlantic States in search of them; and here they are, scattered around on the ground on my place, almost in my own front yard, and here you are, scattered around on the ground with them. Will you be good enough to explain?"

Herbert explained as best he could. He began with his determination to get out and do something different, and sketched in the story of the day's events from then on.

"Here I am," he wound up. "Here are the bonds, and there's what's left of the Ford we both came in. That's all I know about it."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Batwood. "You say you haven't a cent of money, young man?"

"Not a cent," Herbert admitted.

"Then it will probably be of more than passing interest to you to know that I put up a reward of ten thousand dollars for the return of these bonds. You have indubitably returned them. The fact that your action was unintentional has nothing to do with it. The reward belongs to you, and I'll see that it's paid."

"Oh, no!" Herbert protested. He pointed to the girl. "It belongs to her. It's her Ford, not mine."

"But I should never have seen my Ford again if it hadn't been for him," the girl argued. "The reward belongs to him."

"I think you might introduce me to the young lady," Batwood suggested.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Hathaway apologized. "Mr. Batwood, this is—" He hesitated and colored.

"I'm Miss Draper—Miss Edith Draper," she said, blushing.

"Yes, Mr. Batwood, this is Miss Edith Draper."

Batwood bowed.

"Now that we know who we are, suppose you young people go up to the house and make yourselves comfortable? You can spend some of the time deciding which one of you will have the honor of refusing ten thousand dollars, while I get in touch with the detectives who are handling the case, and see if I can find out anything more about it. Oh, you're not able to walk, are you, Mr. Hathaway? I'll send a car for you immediately. Now, if you'll excuse me for a little while, I'll try and find out just what has happened."

VII.

Batwood returned, late that afternoon, with a reasonably complete idea of what had occurred. The messenger and one of his three accomplices had been arrested and had confessed.

It appeared that after stealing the bonds, and hiding for two days in the city, they had been driven to Peekskill, where they were to meet the three other members of the gang. In Peekskill they had found themselves alone for a few minutes, and had decided to double-cross their comrades and get away with the whole of the swag. They had hopped into Edith Draper's Ford and started back toward New York along unfrequented roads. While the messenger drove the car, his partner had opened up the upholstery, taken out the padding, stuffed in the bonds, and tacked the covering back in place again.

In White Plains the messenger left his partner watching the Ford while he went to get something to eat. The partner became panic-stricken at sight of a policeman loitering in a doorway opposite where the Ford was parked, and deserted his post. When he got nerve enough to return, the car had disappeared. It must have been stolen by the man who had sold it to Hathaway, having no idea of the fortune that was hidden in it.

The two boys had then communicated with the other members of the gang by telephone, and the hunt for the much stolen Ford began. The men who had shot at Herbert and Edith were members of the gang.

"That's about the way the thing seems to have come about," Batwood explained. "And now about the reward—who shall I pay it to?"

Edith Draper blushed furiously. Herbert put his arm about her.

"Wait until to-morrow, and then make the payment to Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hathaway," he said.

Batwood beamed.

"My congratulations!" he exclaimed. "What a remarkable day it's been for you! Fast worker when you once get started, aren't you? By the way, about that Baxter Memorial business—we take a final vote on it to-night. I don't mind telling you that you're going to get the job. My wedding present, eh? Yes! It's surely been a big day for you!"

Herbert nodded.

"I'll say so!" he said solemnly.

ANTICLIMAX

You sent me books—I paid you back with flowers;
  Of course, it was the proper thing to do.
We had so much in common; tastes like ours
  Were meant for sharing—and the friendship grew.

Oh, it was quite amusing! I began
  Hoarding your letters with a jealous care;
Made many a secret, sentimental plan;
  Waited, when waiting seemed too hard to bear.

And then we met. I wonder if you saw
  Under the mask I wore that day, or guessed,
With what deep thankfulness, what reverent awe,
  I gave your beauty to my heart's unrest?
I touched your hand, impersonal and cool—
You'd played the friend while *I* had played the fool!

Leslie Nelson Jennings

The Man of the Miracle

THE STRANGE STORY OF A MODERN MEDICAL MYSTERY

By Vance Thompson

Author of "Eat and Grow Thin," "The Carnival of Destiny," etc.

XVII

DR. CREE breathed deeply and threw out his arms. It was as if he came back from a journey. His face changed. The visionary look went out of it. He slipped into his professional attitude, suave, decorous, masterful.

"What poets you business men are!" he exclaimed. "You quite carried me away, Mr. Macraw; but these are dreams with which science has nothing to do. The question is, can I do for you what I have done for Mr. Jenks? My great discovery is not so simple as you think. It is no universal panacea. You can't drink something out of a bottle, Mr. Macraw, and be young. How shall I make it clear to you in nontechnical terms?" the doctor asked. He was once more his usual professional self, picking his words and enjoying the sound of his rich, warm voice. "Let us say it is like building a house. You can build it only if the foundation is solid and sure. Now Mr. Jenks had the foundation—what I like to call the health basis, upon which I could erect this—this temple of youth. In your case, Mr. Macraw—you will pardon my plain speaking—I should be trying to build a house on the sands; and that would be disaster for you and for me. No—please—let me explain. What is the human body? I might call it a congeries of vibrations. Within those multiple, circling vibrations there is a central unity, which I often define as the ego-cell. That cell, Mr. Macraw, is you. It is maintained in existence only by the harmony, the coöperation, of the twofold vibrations that make up your body, so to speak. You follow me?"

"Well, I'm listening," replied J. B. curtly.

"Thank you. When I fortified and reharmonized the Jenksian vibrations, if I may so express myself, I gradually restored him to the normal state of an undecayed, unwarped, and uninjured adult male. A risk? A great risk. There were hours when I took my head between my hands to keep it from bursting with the horrible dread of failure. At such moments I saw in my mind the vibratory system of Mr. Jenks whirling away into chaos, leaving behind it his tiny, naked ego-cell there on the bed, like — like an oyster. That would have been the end of my esteemed friend, if I may call him so. But through all those terrible experiences I had one source of faith in our ultimate success, and that was the health basis, as I call it, of Mr. Jenks. But you, Mr. Macraw—"

The sentence broke off in a gesture of helplessness.

"What's the matter with me and my damned vibrations, eh? Ain't I just about like everybody else?" the old banker asked suspiciously.

"No," Dr. Cree said boldly. "As an honest man, I cannot say that you are. There are signs—we call them indices. I see them, even from here. A closer examination would only confirm my diagnosis. Building on the sands, sir, building on the sands!"

"I hope you're satisfied, J. B.," Hiram Jenks interposed. "You asked for it."

"What's the matter with me?" Mr. Macraw shouted.

"Nothing, nothing, Mr. Macraw," the doctor said reassuringly. "Pray do not take it that way. You may live for years. You will live. It is not that; but your vibratory constitution—"

"My what?" J. B. snarled.

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"Your vibratory constitution, as I call it, is not one upon which a rejuvenation may be built. As an honest man, as a man of science, I tell you so. As you are, Mr. Macraw, you can carry on pleasantly to—to your appointed hour; but you will have to give up all expectation of being young once more, like our esteemed friend Mr. Jenks. I am sorry to say it; but science has given its final verdict—from my lips."

There was a certain majesty in the great scientist's decisive statement. It was as rigid and implacable as an angel with a sword, guarding the gate of some forbidden paradise; but J. B., obstinate, refused to be turned away.

"That's all very well, doctor. I know you're infallible," he said in his old sarcastic way; "but I've just come from my own doctor, and I'd like you to look at these diagrams of my interior. Then, I think—"

"Pardon me," Dr. Cree interrupted.

The little desk telephone had rung, and the doctor went over and listened.

"A card?" he said. "Well, bring the card."

He stood waiting until Claude Allingham, white-aproned, casting furtive glances to right and left, shuffled up to him and handed him a card. Dr. Cree read the few words written on it reflectively, his black eyebrows drawn together.

"What is it?" Ada asked hurriedly.

"Nothing, dear," he replied, and then, to Claude: "I'll see him in the back room—at once."

Still he made no movement, but stood studying the writing on the card. At last he looked up and met Mr. Macraw's round eyes, cold and fixed, the color of some red stone. With that he smiled apologetically and said that he would have to excuse himself for a moment—"professional duty."

On his way out he dropped the card in Ada's lap. She took it up, read it quickly, and, without change of expression, let it fall once more in her lap. It fell with the blank side up, and Mr. Jenks, even if he had been paying heed, could not have read what was written upon it; but Hiram was leaning back on the corner of the couch, sulkily indifferent to what was going on.

They were all silent, and the room, robbed of the vehemence and glitter of the great man of science, seemed empty.

"Busy man, the doctor," Mr. Macraw said, as the silence grew more and more oppressive. "Got many patients now?"

"He is always busy," Ada answered, after a pause.

"I see!" said J. B.

Again there was silence—an expectant silence, full of infinite possibilities. Mr. Macraw took up one of the scarabs from the table at his elbow, and seemed to be giving it his attention; but now and then his eyes went swiftly to the man and woman in front of him—the pale-faced wife of Dr. Cree and his old partner, flushed with sulky youth. They were sitting there, without word or motion, when the doctor returned to the reception room.

Dr. Cree was enveloped in his grave mood of professional responsibility. He took his former place on the couch. As he did so, he touched Ada's shoulder protectively, but did not speak to her. He turned at once to Mr. Macraw.

"What were you saying about your own physician?" he asked.

J. B. unrolled half a dozen sheets of semitransparent paper, upon which were visible heavy black lines in long curves and loops.

"That's a map of the inside of John Barker Macraw," the old man said. "If science has anything to say against it, I'd like to hear it now. My doctor has known me inside and out for fifty years, and he didn't tell me anything about those sandy vibrations you were talking of. There's his report and general audit. I'd like to have you look at it."

Dr. Cree took the papers. In spite of Ada's swift restraining hand he rose, went over to his desk, and spread them out. He pored over them, tracing the lines with his finger. He read the statement, ponderously, and went back to another examination of the drawings.

He took his time. The minutes seemed to lengthen out like hours. At last, with a half laugh, the doctor whirled around on J. B., waving the papers like a welcoming handkerchief.

"This is different! This changes everything! Why didn't you let me see these before? That's where you should have begun, Mr. Macraw. What is it, Ada?" he asked abruptly.

"I didn't speak," she said. "No — I have nothing to say."

"Sorry! I thought you did. Mr. Macraw"—he faced the old banker once more—"this is very encouraging. You are a better man than I thought you were. The eye deceives even the scientist. I was mistaken, but the X ray is never deceived. That settles it!"

"And those sandy vibrations—"

"Nonsense! We'll begin whenever you please, Mr. Macraw, and I'll do for you what I have done for your friend, Mr. Jenks."

"Convinced, are you?"

"There may be danger. There is always danger. You must decide for yourself. Perhaps you want to think it over—to talk it over with your partner."

The doctor glanced at Hiram Jenks, but elicited neither word nor sign.

"I guess my mind is pretty well made up, or I'd not be sitting here, Dr. Cree. The sooner the better. You name your terms, or you leave it to me—whatever you want."

"Oh, that!" The doctor waved away the question of money with gesturing hands. "Will to-morrow suit you?"

"What shall I have to do?"

"Just what Mr. Jenks did. I shall begin the treatment slowly. It will not interfere with your occupations very much—that is, not at first. An hour or so a day; and then, of course, for the final treatment I shall have to have you here in the sanatorium. Mr. Jenks can tell you all about it, and perhaps that would be better. You will be kind enough, Mr. Jenks?"

"Oh, whatever J. B. wants," said Hiram, rousing himself. "Of course! Why not?"

"All right," returned Mr. Macraw.

"And you'll come to-morrow?" the doctor suggested.

"That 'll suit me."

"Say at five o'clock, or six—that was Mr. Jenks's hour."

"Yes, I'll be here," promised Mr. Macraw, getting to his feet. "Do you want those papers—the maps?"

"With your permission — yes, I will study them. I'll make my own examination to-morrow; but I can tell you now, Mr. Macraw, that you have to-day taken the first step on the road to youth!"

He glowed. The old victorious look was on his handsome face. The old confidence rang in his voice; and Mr. Macraw found that one of his hands was being pressed between the doctor's warm, encouraging palms.

"Well, I am grateful, doctor; but you wasted a lot of my time before coming to the point. Are you going down with me, Hiram?"

"I promised Mr. Jenks a treatment today—just a little reënforcement," Dr. Cree said quickly.

"There you are, J. B.," Mr. Jenks remarked, showing some friendly animation at last; "but I'll confess I'd like to go with you. You've knocked me all of a heap. I never thought of you going into this!"

"Why not me?"

"Why not, to be sure? Well, I'll be down at the office as soon as I can. You old scoundrel!"

"We'll show 'em, Hiram—you and me!" cried J. B. gleefully.

He poked Hiram in the ribs, made his old-fashioned bow to Ada, and went out. The doctor offered to accompany him to the door, but J. B. refused.

"I know my way about, doctor," he said, and went out of the room alone.

He took up his hat and gloves and opened the street door. The bright midday light streamed into the hall and fell full upon the doorway of a small room at the back. J. B. heard no sound, but he turned, as if he had been touched on the shoulder, and glanced back.

In the doorway stood a man, clearly outlined. The old banker could take him in from head to heel. He was small, dark, and grizzled, and his face, with its sharp features, looked like an unsuccessful experiment in clay.

"I never saw that little black-jowled whiffler before," J. B. said to himself, as he shut the door between them and went down the steps into the street.

XVIII

HAPPINESS is very much like a secret. The only way to get the best out of it is to share it with some one else. Then only does it become worth while.

There were not many men with whom J. B. Macraw cared to share a secret, and usually he had taken his happiness alone, locking it up with his *ab* scarab; but the last few days had given him a kind of happiness of which even the most testy old man, when he feels it, likes to make a parade—physical happiness.

A sense of bodily well-being permeated him. It flowed up and down his spinal column and branched out along his pleasantly stimulated nerves. It covered, as with cotton, his rheumatic twinges. It bathed, as with oil, his rusty bones. When he walked, old J. B. almost strode along. His chin was up, and his fox-colored eyes looked the world boldly in the face.

He had taken a number of Dr. Cree's preliminary treatments. He had soused his body in the tossing color waves of the red room. Each time he had come out of it as one emerges from the battling surf of the sea, freshened, invigorated, surcharged with vitality. He had lain upon linen, under the great swaying shafts of green light, and had absorbed their shimmering, youth-giving vibrations, while Dr. Cree—prowling about the room like some soft-footed god, darkling and mysterious—talked endlessly of the propagation of electric-magnetic waves and colors vibrating in the mid spaces of life.

Again and again J. B. had come out of those throbbing, dazzling chambers of mystery, feeling within him new power and a growing arrogance of health. One day, when he had gone home after a treatment of longer duration than usual, he had picked up one of the brass bowls on his cigar cabinet, laid it on the palm of his hand, and slowly brought together his long fingers in a mighty grip. The bowl remained as it was—defiantly intact.

"I'll do it yet!" he informed the bowl, and put it down.

A sense of power, and with it a glow of physical happiness—these he brought away with him from Dr. Cree's laboratory of youth; these he took with him, of a morning, into the bank. They were real—about that there could be no mistake. Old J. B. knew!

Studying the great Mr. Macraw in his timid way, Pickering saw the change in him, the new look of well-being, and, more amazing still, a sort of cheeriness, as if the old man was pleased, not only with himself, but with the world in general—even with the ancient Mr. Pickering.

It was extraordinary!

It was not the sort of thing to make an old employee, who did not know quite where he stood, anyway, any more comfortable. There was too much going on in the bank. There were too many changes for poor Pickering to look with confidence upon his fear-haunted future. A little shiver ran over him every time the bell summoned him to Mr. Macraw's private office.

"What's going to happen now? What 'll they be up to next?" he kept asking himself.

It was in such a mood that he slipped through the half open door this morning, and advanced timorously to the desk where the old banker sat, smiling, smoking a long, black cigar.

It was Mr. Macraw's morning for sharing his happiness. He was "feeling fine," as he would have said—by which he meant that the tide of his vitality was high, and had brought with it, if not exhilaration, at least a real sensation of self-content. He looked with unprecedented kindliness at the timid, faithful, half useless old man who had drifted for so many years in the wake of the great ship of Jenks & Macraw.

Poor old relic! He did not look very happy; and into Mr. Macraw's mind—where it must have felt as lonely as a robin in a graveyard—there came the astounding idea that he would like to make old Pickering happy. He told himself that he might share a little of his happiness with Pickering. Without preparing him, without pausing to reflect that poor Pickering might have a weak heart, he made this astonishing announcement:

"Pickering, from to-day—or make it from the beginning of the current month—you will draw precisely double the salary you have drawn heretofore. I'll make a note of it for Mr. Lane. You have been very faithful. I appreciate it, and this seems to be the best way of showing that I do so. Mr. Jenks agrees with me—I mean he will when he returns."

The astounded Pickering simply stared. For many, many years he had known J. B. Macraw, but this J. B. Macraw was a stranger to him. He wondered if he was mad—or was the old banker mad? He had often dreamed of a bigger salary, but this wasn't a dream—it was true.

His lip trembled. He murmured a few words of thanks.

"You are very good, Mr. Macraw. If I can show my—my devotion to Jenks & Macraw—"

For the first time in his life some of the real love he had for Hiram Jenks overflowed and enveloped the other partner.

"That's all right, Pickering. We appreciate good service," Mr. Macraw said, still sharing his happiness with Pickering, since there was no one else with whom he could share it. "We're glad to recognize it in this practical way, eh?"

There really was a smile — distinctly a friendly smile—on the banker's grim face, and Pickering responded to it in a way as unexpected to himself as to Mr. Macraw. It was evidently a morning for sharing things, and what Pickering, shaken out of his timidity by his employer's kindliness, had to share was a secret. He went up to the desk until he could almost touch it, and leaned forward, a look of resolution on his feeble face.

" Mr. Macraw, sir, may I—"

The words stopped, but the question was in his eyes.

" What is it, Pickering? Anything else you want, eh? I thought that would hold you for a while!"

" It's not about myself, Mr. Macraw," he said irresolutely. " May I speak of Mr. Jenks, sir?"

" Mr. Jenks!"

" Young Mr. Hiram, sir."

" What about him?" J. B. snapped out, more in his usual way.

" I'm afraid he's in trouble, sir; and as his father is not here, I thought—you are so kind, sir—I ought to tell you."

J. B. had listened patiently while Pickering fumbled out this broken statement. When it was finished, he sat for a moment, thinking it over in his cautious way. At last he seemed to have made up his mind.

" In his father's absence," he said quietly, " yes, perhaps I should know."

" I have not spoken to young Mr. Hiram, sir. I have been greatly troubled."

" Troubled about what?"

" It is this, sir. My hour for luncheon is from twelve to one, and I go to a little restaurant in Cedar Street, where I have been going for many years."

" What is it you have to say?"

" The restaurant, sir, is next to the building " — Pickering lowered his voice — " in which are the offices of Ogle & Brine, the lawyers, sir."

J. B. was looking down his nose at the ash of his cigar.

" Well?"

" Ogle & Brine, sir—the people who kept calling for the elder Mr. Jenks. You may remember that Mr. Ogle himself came. Now, sir, they don't come here, but young Mr. Hiram goes to them. I've seen him going there again and again, and I'm afraid he's in trouble. If you'll excuse me, they are not our lawyers—I mean the bank's lawyers. I know their reputation, for I have made inquiries, sir, and for a gentleman like our young Mr. Hiram, sir, to be going there—and coming out with a bad look on his face, and so troubled that he didn't seem to notice any one—not even me, sir, when he almost brushed against me—I'm afraid something's wrong. I fear he's in trouble—if not worse," Pickering concluded, in a whisper.

" Trouble? What do you mean by worse? Take your time, Pickering. Do you want to sit down?"

" No, sir, thank you, Mr. Macraw—I couldn't sit down. I will try and tell you, sir. It is putting two and two together. I often do that. It is my way of reasoning out things. You know how we talk in the bank—just among ourselves, all in perfect loyalty, and because we take such an interest in the bank."

" So long as you don't chatter outside."

" Only in the bank, sir, and we can't help knowing things. One day I heard some one talking about young Mr. Hiram, and what he said was: 'Young Jenks is rocking the bank.' I don't know what he meant, but Mr. Lane was down on him hard, and shut him up."

" Go on, Pickering!"

" Then I began to see our Mr. Hiram going into those offices—Ogle & Brine's. I found out that on those very days he had drawn out large amounts of money from his father's personal account—on those very days. It may be for reinvestment, sir, but—"

" I see," J. B. said quietly. " Your interest in Mr. Jenks is quite understandable—ye-es. After all, it's his business, isn't it, Pickering? Still, I can see that from your point of view you've done quite right to take up my time this way. It's what you would do, Pickering—ye-es."

Little by little Mr. Macraw had relapsed into his ordinary manner, caustic and dry. Old Pickering backed slowly toward the door, already regretting his burst of courage. He faded out of the room.

For a while J. B. sat perfectly still. At last he laid down his cigar, and made a motion as if to pick up the desk telephone which connected him with Mr. Lane's office. Then, apparently, he changed his mind, for the gesture was not completed.

He was no longer the cheery old man who had shared his happiness with the ancient office boy; he was the grim John Barker Macraw who for forty years had gnawed the bones that litter the Street. He got up and went to the door that opened from his office into that of his partner. His hand was on the knob, but he did not enter the room. He stood there, brooding, and then turned slowly away.

Half a dozen times he paced the length of the floor, from the door to the window and back again. The window gave him a glimpse of the street below, filled with hurrying figures — two-footed men, prowling, stalking, hunting. Always he came irresolutely back to the closed door of brown wood—a door like any other—behind which some unknown thing had happened.

He thought he knew every whisper that crept through the bank, every gesture that was made in it, from the young clerk perfuming his hair in the wash room, while he puffed a quick cigarette, to Mr. Lane's confidential comments on his chiefs. He thought he knew his partner as one knows the strength and weakness of his own hand; and yet some unknown thing had happened.

At last he took up the telephone book and looked out an address. Then he put on his hat and went out.

"Tell Mr. Jenks, if he comes in, that I'll be back," he said over his shoulder to Pickering.

In his old scowling way J. B. drove straight ahead through the crowd, which parted before him, edging to right and left to give way to this savage and formidable king of the Street. When he found himself in Cedar Street, he looked up for the number he wanted. That was it!

It was a tall building, immodest, opulent, new. The open doors disclosed a spacious hall with telephone booths, a newspaper stand, and a cigar shop. J. B. inspected the marble cenotaph on the wall, upon which were inscribed the names of the tenants of the building. "Ogle & Brine"—he soon found what he wanted. Judging by the numbers that stood opposite their names, the lawyers occupied offices consisting of many rooms.

Mr. Macraw went toward the elevator doors. As he passed the counter where cigars were sold, a stocky young fellow in gray clothes touched his hat—a smart, autumnal bowler.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Macraw?"

"That you, Shanahan?"

"It's me all right, Mr. Macraw—dressed up a bit."

"What are you doing here, Shanahan?"

"Me?" said Dan innocently. "Buying a cigar—out of my salary. The salary is all right, but I'm not working much these days. The young boss has taken on another chauffeur, so I am long on leisure."

"I asked you, Shanahan, what you're doing here."

"Yes, sir," Dan replied, but he did not answer the question. Instead, smiling in his friendly, unabashed fashion, he asked: "You can't tell me, sir, when Mr. Jenks is coming back? I'm getting pretty tired of waiting for him. You see, he and me got on rather well together. We might have been made for each other. You can't tell me, sir?"

Mr. Macraw listened quietly, looking Shanahan straight in the eyes. They were good eyes, clear, steady, honest, but apparently they were saying more than Dan himself had said; or perhaps the banker was reading into them something that was not really there. Mr. Macraw was not quite sure.

He would have moved away, and gone about the business he was on, if he had not observed on Shanahan's frank, telltale face a sudden look of intentness.

"Well, good-by, sir," Dan said, and started to go.

"Hold on for a minute, Shanahan! Who's that fellow?"

"That man, sir?"

In the full light from the street a man had stopped at the newspaper stand. Mr. Macraw had seen him halt there, had seen him cast a keen glance at Shanahan and himself and then take up a newspaper. It was perhaps because of the way the light shone full upon his face that J. B. recognized the little black-visaged whiffler he had seen in the house of Dr. Ira Cree—standing, even so, in the light. There was no mistaking this little man, dark and grizzled, with a face pinched up like an unsuccessful experiment in clay.

"That man, sir? Oh, that's the great lawyer, Mr. Brine—Ogle & Brine. Famous man, sir—very well known."

"You know him, Shanahan?"

"I'm getting to know him better every day," Dan answered; "but we're not on speaking terms—yet."

"H-m!" was the banker's comment.

He watched Mr. Brine go out of the building, without giving any indication of wanting to speak to him. The well-known lawyer had not looked back. He had hopped away, black, alert, and sinister as a crow.

Dan had a remark to make.

"That face of his looks like a judgment on him," the chauffeur said, grinning. "It sure does! He ought to wear one of them dinky little masks, like at the French ball. Every time he shows that face he's making a confession!"

These light and friendly remarks drifted past Mr. Macraw like smoke. He was staring at the street into which Mr. Brine had vanished, all the while rubbing thoughtfully at his bony chin with thumb and forefinger.

"I came here intending to talk to that man, or to his partner," he said, after a pause; "but I've changed my mind now, Shanahan."

"You have, sir?"

"You are the man I'm going to talk to—understand? Now go and call a taxi; and, Shanahan—"

"Yes, Mr. Macraw."

"Take the grin off your face—that's no place for it now. How long have you been snooping around here and watching those fellows?"

"Me?" replied Dan. "Sure I'll get you a taxi, Mr. Macraw, in a minute."

He touched his hat and ran out. J. B. followed him slowly.

In a long, unrejuvenated life old Mr. Macraw had acquired a tolerably competent knowledge, he fancied, of humankind. Moreover, he had had Shanahan under his eye for a number of years. He was making up his mind to trust him.

It was not an easy thing for J. B. to do. Indeed, he had never quite trusted any one—except, of course, Hiram Jenks, and, in a remote past, his wife; but now he determined to put a certain amount of confidence in his old partner's chauffeur. At any rate, he decided that Shanahan should confide in him. He had reached this decision when the taxi came to a halt at the curb.

"Help me in, Dan," he said. "This left knee is bad again. Thanks! Do you know where we are going now?"

"I do not."

"O'Farrell's office. Do you know the address?"

"The teck? We're not brothers, but I know where to raise him."

"Raise him, then, Dan," ordered Mr. Macraw.

Shanahan gave the direction to the chauffeur, got in, pulled the door of the taxi to, and sat down facing Mr. Macraw. The grin had reappeared on his hard little face. In the old days of his battling youth he had always gone into the ring with a grin on. It was the Irish in him.

XIX

"And you can't tell me when she will be in?" said Dan Shanahan.

It was the day after Shanahan's taxicab ride with old J. B.

"No," replied Mrs. Dowsing.

She had kept Dan on the doorstep, and she spoke through the half opened door of the house in Eleventh Street.

"Nor where she is?"

"No."

"I should like to see Miss Starr, ma'am," Dan persisted. "I think she'd like to see me, too."

"I don't know where she is. She is out. She may be in a shop—if there is anything she hasn't bought, which I doubt. She may be having her fortune told—though why she should spend money for that I don't see," Mrs. Dowsing added. "I'm willing to tell it to her for nothing—the kind of fortune she's likely to have!"

"Who is her pet witch?" Dan asked.

It was then that he learned of Natta. He had heard of her before, for he knew the creeks and backwaters of the town, and the things that float there. Indeed, he had occasionally had a few dollars' worth of prophecy himself, when things were running badly. That, too, was part of his inheritance—a half belief in the mysterious game that the dark powers play with little men.

If Mrs. Dowsing had not been in one of her sourest moods, she probably would not have mentioned Madelon's connection with the sorceress. She had been born too near Salem to speak lightly of witches. Among her inheritances was a hereditary memory of burning, or, perhaps, of being burned. It was only because her dislike for Madelon was keener than usual that she threw this reproach at her.

Dan took it rather as a compliment to Miss Starr's intelligence and "decency." There couldn't be very much wrong, he believed, with a girl who was willing to let one of them clairvoyants, as advertised, look into her and untangle the complications of her future. A bad one wouldn't risk it!

Natta was no slouch of a little prophetess, at that. She had predicted Dan's victory over the Cold Chicken in the seventh round, precisely as had eventuated. On the whole, when he took his leave of Mrs. Dowsing, his opinion of Miss Starr had changed for the better.

It may have been due merely to Mrs. Dowsing's curt way with him. After that first confidence about Madelon's connection with the Crees, Dan had expected that he and Mrs. Dowsing would be on easy terms, working together in the interest of his old boss; but after that first outburst she had drawn back from him, and seemed to include him in the dislike she had for most of humanity. He felt that his sympathy was veering around toward that other object of her disdain—the little Miss Starr whom he had last seen blown about, on her high heels, in a storm of wind and rain.

Moreover, events had been building up Shanahan's sense of self-importance. He was in no mood for the old woman's bad manners; and it was a cold " Good day " that he gave her as she slowly shut the door in his face.

Natta's rooms in lower Sixth Avenue were over a hair shop. The narrow doorway at the side was plastered all over with tin signs, announcing the queer jumble of people who lived above, and who had a strange variety of merchandise to sell. The windows, clear to the top, were lettered with advertisements, proclaiming that one had only to go up the dark staircase in order to be photographed, massaged, electro-belted, new-teethed, millinered, beauty-doctored, palmistried, and—this was Natta—clairvoyantly put on good terms with the past, the present, and the future. And behind each advertisement hovered the queer folk with beaks and claws, ready to dive into the human tide that flowed up and down the dingy avenue and fish a livelihood out of it, like gulls.

Shanahan went up the three flights of stairs that brought him to Natta's door. Over the bell was a printed card, with her name—" Mme. Natta "—and the announcement that her hours were from noon to nine o'clock in the evening.

In answer to his ring at the bell, a little shutter in the door opened, and through the aperture one round, pale yellow eye inspected him.

" All right! " said Dan. " It's me! "

The eye vanished, and a voice came through the slit in the door.

" What do you want?" it inquired.

" Mme. Natta. She knows me, all right. Open the door, little one! "

The little one was taller than he was; but she consisted chiefly of bones and a mop of lank hair, pulled back from a bulging forehead. Her meager body seemed to be held together only by the skimpy red dress that went like a sheath from her neck to her ankles. Her yellow eyes were as unblinking as those of a cat. Her voice was small and silky. It was the voice of a child, coming out of this skeleton of five foot eight.

" Come in," she said. " What's your name?"

" Mr. Shanahan. The initial is D, for Daniel."

He was shown into a back room, where there was not much light. Still, he could make out a little table covered with black velvet, a few chairs, and a sort of bedlike couch, without legs, lying flat on the floor. Over it was spread a rumpled curtain, blue, with spotty brown flowers. There were no pillows.

A door opened, apparently from a kitchen, for it admitted not only Mme. Natta, but also a warm, oniony wave of air. The sorceress came ponderously in, massive and serene. She seemed to recognize Shanahan, for she said:

" I told you that you would give up prize fighting. You have done so. It is well! "

" I had my day," replied Dan. " It was a good one, too."

" You are not what you seem," she went on, with heavy placidity, as if an ox had taken to prophesying.

" No? That's too bad! I've got a good job, and I ought to look it."

" Few are what they seem. What I mean is that you haven't come here about your position. It is something else."

She sat down, her hands in her ample lap, her big ankles crossed one over the other.

" No, you are right. This time, Mme. Natta, it ain't for me. It's for a friend of mine. I want an appointment, so he won't have to wait, for he hasn't got much time."

" The best hour will be four o'clock," said Natta. " Mostly they come later."

" That 'll do. I'll bring him."

Having made the appointment, however, Shanahan gave no sign of taking an early departure.

" I didn't want to ring in any surprise on you," he explained pleasantly. " I don't need to be convinced, Mrs. Natta, that you've got 'em all beat to a finish; but what's the use making things hard when we can take 'em easy? I believe in being aboveboard. To deceive your psychic," Dan continued, drawing his chair closer, " is as silly as trying to fool your trainer. The more he knows, the better. Now this friend of mine—"

Natta's face was unchanged. It remained as expressionless as the wall behind her. Her eyes, with their veiled look of infinite aloofness, showed no understanding of what Dan was saying. They did not brighten even when, having finished, he took out his pocketbook to pay for the future consultation. She did not seem to count the bills he gave her before they vanished into the black folds of her gown.

Huge and somber as a sibyl cut out of wet clay, she sat there and listened. When Shanahan pushed back his chair and rose to go, she said quietly, in that steady, masculine voice of hers, that she would expect him at four o'clock.

" Right!" exclaimed smiling Dan. " Thank you, madam!"

He left her sitting broadly in the big chair, wrapped in a mysterious atmosphere of complicity and onions. He had found a collaborator in the sorceress.

Precisely at four o'clock the meager girl with the eyes of a yellow cat opened to him once more, and showed him into the dim room at the back of Mme. Natta's apartment. In front of him, his hand on the boy's shoulder, Dan pushed a reluctant Claude Allingham.

" Sit down," Dan whispered. " Put your hat under the chair, and keep quiet. The great witch is coming!"

Claude was quiet enough. He could not have spoken had he dared to try. He sat upright in the chair, his knees together, his hands on his solar plexus, while his startled eyes roved around the room.

Natta entered. She had made no change in her costume, save that around her ample waist she had tied a girdle of tinsel coins, with long ends falling down in front. She had whitened her face with powder, and her thick bobbed hair was like a black frame around it.

She took her place at the little table, without speaking, without looking at either Dan or the boy.

" My friend wants to have his fortune told, ma'am," Dan said at last, in his awed whisper.

Claude gave a little start as she turned her eyes on him. She looked steadily into his frightened face and spoke, deep-voiced and slow.

" Already I can see many things," she said. " This young man is not like common men. A great fortune awaits him, and much fame. He is a young man of power. He will do great things. He has a double soul."

Claude's crisp head swayed to and fro to the rhythm of her words. His lower lip trembled.

" Wait!" said Natta.

She rang a little bell on the table, and the lank girl in red came in. She had made a kind of toilet by wrapping a red scarf around her head, like a turban. She appeared to be as reluctant and almost as frightened as Claude himself.

" Ca-ro-li-na!"

Natta pronounced the name as if it had been a spell laid upon the girl; and indeed it seemed to have that effect, for Carolina shuddered from head to foot, and fell, as stiffly as a rod falls, on the low, flat couch. She lay there on her back, rigid, open-eyed, breathing deeply. Then, slowly, her eyes closed.

Presently a pale fringe of phosphorescent light was discernible around the girl, who lay in a trance. It flickered and wavered, but did not entirely die out. It was a shimmering light that bordered her motionless body and was apparently emitted from the girl herself.

Slowly this halo increased in brilliancy. It lighted up the hollow face, the lips drawn back from the teeth. Then, suddenly, it went out.

" O-o-oh!"

A groan issued from the trembling lips of Claude Allingham. It came from his very soul—his double soul. What he saw was a vague mist gathering over the girl, which gradually grew denser and began to take form—the form of a sphere, swaying, enlarging. Then from the cloudy ball two lean tentacles reached out to right and left.

Claude was moaning softly, rocking his tremulous body to and fro. Shanahan sat with clenched jaws, and with clenched hands buried in his pockets. He was getting more than he had counted upon, and centuries of ghost-ridden Ireland were crying aloud within him.

Always silence, broken only by hard-drawn breathing and Claude's dull, self-pitying moans. The swaying sphere grew denser, shining with some kind of internal light. The dim, groping tentacles took on the semblance of arms—with hands—and out of the cloud a face emerged.

It was a dim face, with eyes. It hovered over the lank girl and slowly rose, drawing up with it, as it were, a shadowy body, which grew tall, filled itself out, and stood, at last, poised a few inches over the unconscious figure on the couch. It seemed to be a woman, mysterious and alive, but vague, as if modeled out of moonlight and dust.

"Speak!" commanded Natta.

The thing spoke—spoke in a voice that quivered as if it came across the strings of a violin—the ghost of a voice.

"I cannot speak," it said.

"Speak!" Natta repeated.

"I have come for him, Claude!"

The voice died in a whisper.

"Who are you?"

"I am his spirit guide. Claude!"

Again the thing sighed out the boy's name softly.

"Speak!" repeated Natta.

"I have led him up out of the dark toward the light. I have taken him out of the blackness, where I found him—where the red eagles flew over his head—where there were little black houses and tall trees that walked in the night, and howling beasts, like a circus, and black men. Claude!"

Again that sighing call, like wind in the leaves.

"I led him away to the light. I breathed upon his soul, and made it white. I led him to the door of a house—oh, oh, the house of terror!—and to a man. I led him!"

Claude's moaning had ceased. He was listening now, his life hanging on the whispered words of that fluctuant, shining cloud which was ghost and woman.

"I laid my power upon the man, and he did what I told him to do. Even as I had made white the soul, so he made white the body. Claude!"

The thing began to fade and shrink in size.

"Speak!" Natta commanded sharply.

"The warning—the warning! Now the man regrets what he has done. He wants to send you back into the blackness—you, whom I have brought into the light. He wants to paint your body black again and thrust you into the little houses, where the trees walk at night and men with black faces howl. Claude, Claude, beware! Save yourself! Fear not the man, for you are stronger than he is. Your spirit guide will always be with you, and we shall conquer. Claude!"

The thing wavered and sank, fading down into the rigid body on the couch; but even as it faded and vanished, it wailed again and again:

"Claude! Claude! Claude!"

Natta rose, and went and bent over the girl, making long passes with her big, white hands. Carolina sighed heavily, and her body lost its rigidity, as she passed little by little into a natural sleep. Only then Natta moved away and turned up an electric light, disclosing Dan Shanahan's hard-set fighting face and the lump of fear which had been Claude Allingham.

"Well!" said Dan. "Well!" he repeated, but that was all.

Natta did not resume her seat at the table. She took a chair near Claude and laid her hand on his.

"You have been singularly blessed," she began. "You have seen your guardian angel. You heard her. Did you understand her?"

It may have been the comfort of her hand, the sense of her human presence, that brought Claude back to a measure of sane self-control.

"Yes'm," he managed to say. "I done understood that lady all right!"

"And her warning? You know the man?"

"I know that man," Claude exclaimed with abrupt anger. "I surely know him! He's worse'n a witch. He done told—I mean he told me that he'd turn me into a black boy. He says that, and then he looks at me. My Gawd, I done wish my angel would stick a knife in that man—that Doctah Cree!"

The words came from Claude's trembling lips heavy with rancor and hatred. He had revealed the consuming fear which always lay at his heart, that the doctor might do the very thing against which his guardian angel had warned him, and paint him black again.

"You heard her warning?" asked Dan.

"Yes'm."

"Beware of him, she told you."

"My Gawd, I'm afraid of him," Claude said, thinking of the colored flames and the dark powers of that house of mystery.

"Afraid of him?" Dan remarked, almost in his old careless way. "Well, I'm not afraid of any fat man, doctor or not. You're all right, Claudie, as long as you play with me!"

"Hush!" whispered Natta.

She bent her head, as if listening.

"Yes, dear spirit, I hear your voice," she said. "I will tell him; but can you not write it for him? Yes? Thank you, dear spirit!" In a more matter-of-fact way she added: "The spirit will write a message for you, so that there can be no doubt in your mind as to what you are to do. Have you paper, Mr. Shanahan?"

"Well," said Dan a trifle dubiously, "I suppose I can tear a few leaves out of my notebook."

"Give them to Mr. Allingham."

The two sheets of paper were about four inches across and five inches in length. The boy took them gingerly.

"Have you a lead pencil—a small piece, not too heavy? Yes, thank you—that will do. Now, Mr. Allingham," Natta went on, "go to that table, open the drawer, lay the paper and pencil in it, and then shut the drawer and remain there, standing."

Claude did so. After waiting a few moments, Natta told him to open the drawer and take out the paper.

"My Lawd!" exclaimed Claude. "There's writing on the paper—on both sheets—big, black writing!"

"Read it aloud."

"'Remember the warning!'" the boy read, stumbling a little over the words. "'Take your friend into the house unknown to any one. Have no fear, for he can save you, and he alone. Obey him in all things.'"

"There's more on the other page," Natta prompted.

"'Trust only Mr. Shanahan,'" Claude went on. "'Beware of the man and the little houses and the circus where the wild beasts howl. Remember!'"

"Is that all that is written there?" Natta asked.

Claude looked again at the papers.

"Gawd!" he said. "There ain't nothin' on them! There ain't no writing!"

He let them fall from his shaking hands. Dan jumped and picked them up. They were as blank as when he had torn them fresh from his notebook.

"But you have the message. You will not forget?" said Natta. "Oh, rare soul, your guardian angel wrote them for you alone! No other eye was to see them. You will remember and obey?"

"Yes'm."

Still and lank, the girl lay on the couch in what seemed to be natural sleep. It was an awe-struck Claude Allingham that Dan led from the room and downstairs into the surging street.

"You certainly are some little play boy!" was Shanahan's first remark. "You sure have a fine ghost of your own!"

"My angel!"

"Some angel! I wouldn't dare to go against her. See here, Claudie, it goes as it lays. I've got to save you, all right. You slip me into that house!"

"I sho'ly will, Mr. Shanahan, for you got to destroy that man!"

"You get me in the house, Claudie, and leave the rest to me. I'll show you what I'll do to that doctor who's trying to put the blacks on you. Now you get up to the house. It 'll be after midnight before I show up. You be little Johnny at the rat hole there in the basement, and wait for me—see?"

"Yessir—I ain't never goin' to be afraid of nothin' any more!"

And at that moment Claude believed it. He could not foresee what he was to stumble over in a dark room, and his spirit guide had forgotten to tell him.

XX

In the room of mysterious lights, on the second floor of Dr. Cree's sanatorium, John Barker Macraw lay stretched on the narrow operating bed. He wore a brown dressing gown, which fell open at the top, disclosing his lean, sinewy throat. Over his legs and slippered feet a white linen cloth had been thrown.

Old J. B. was taking the youth cure.

He had already had the out patient treatment. Day after day he had visited the sanatorium and bathed for hours in the color surf of the red room—in the azure Pacific waves of the blue room. The vibrations had swept through his body, carrying strong impulses of youthfulness, energy, courage. At last he had gone into the house of the miracle, and the door had closed behind him with a clang of finality.

He had entered upon the great adventure—the perilous quest—the youth hunt!

At the bank he had told them that he was going away on a short trip to visit his partner, who had not been seen in the offices of Jenks & Macraw for many weeks. He had put his affairs in order. There was always young Hiram Jenks, with his financial genius, to meet daily problems; and behind him were Mr. Lane and other time-trained servitors of his ruthless but conservative finance.

And so, bringing some clothes in a bag, and carrying his old-fashioned dressing case with the ivory tops, J. B. had set out grimly on the road to youth. He lay there on the narrow bed, motionless, his cold, red eyes fixed on the ceiling.

" All ready, Mr. Macraw?"

Dr. Cree approached and stood over him.

The great man of science walked lightly. With his morning coat and light waistcoat he looked like a ponderous robin. He was grave but alert.

" Ain't Mr. Jenks going to be here to-night?" the banker asked. " I thought he was."

" Certainly—he is here. Did you tell him, Ada?"

" Yes, he is coming," said the nurse, who was standing near the tall cabinet with the levers and the tangle of wires.

Mr. Macraw made no comment. He lay motionless, his eyes fixed on the blank ceiling. Even when the door from the hall opened, he did not stir.

" Hello, Hiram! That you?"

" Hello, J. B.! All right?"

" Yes—I suppose you notice the marvelous change," Mr. Macraw went on, with the tone of acidulous banter that was his way of being humorous. " See any hair coming in?"

" We are getting on," interposed Dr. Cree, " far better than I expected. Mr. Macraw is a very interesting subject. His rugged will does not lend itself to the hypnotic treatment, but that is our only way. It opens for us, so to speak, the door to that life-giving and youth-creating magnetic state in which alone the miracle can take place. A strong personality!"

" Hear that, Hiram?" J. B. said, but his eyes scarcely moved, and the voice might have come from a mechanical box.

" Last night, and again this morning, we were very successful. Mr. Macraw passed more rapidly into the state of lethargy, and from that quite readily into the phase of rigidity—what I might call automatic hypnosis. We have developed the ideodynamic force to a high degree. All is going well. Now, if you please—kindly sit over there by the window, Mr. Jenks. Are the curtains drawn?"

The curtains were not drawn, but they were not needed. The window panes were of frosted glass, and outside the night was so black that the darkness seemed to be pasted against them.

" All ready? Let yourself go, Mr. Macraw. I do not ask you to be negative. That would be asking too much of so positive a character as you are; but try to let yourself go. Meet the forces halfway, as I often say."

Hiram Jenks had gone over to the chair by the window. Apparently he was in one of his sulky moods. Save to greet J. B., he had scarcely spoken.

" Down that side light, please. Silence now! Give me the disk."

The light went out; in the room was only shadowy darkness; and then, four feet above the head of the recumbent man, there appeared a disk, violet blue in color, rotating rapidly. It whirled there, implacable and compelling as the apocalyptic wheel. J. B.'s eyes followed it—clung to it—

He began to breathe deeply, regularly. His breath could be heard as it went and came in the rusty passages of his old, old body. It was the only perceptible sound in the room.

Minutes passed. Dr. Cree leaned over his patient and made slow magnetic passes from the head downward. At last he straightened up.

" He's deep in it now," he said. " It's what I call the fourth phase of lethargy. There are, I have discovered, six distinct states of hypnosis, each with its corresponding phase of lethargy. I call this one, into which he has now passed, automatic catalepsy. The light, Ada, if you please, and then shut off the disk."

When the light came up in the room, it showed a smiling scientist looking down with pride and self-applause at the lean, motionless figure of the old banker—a hollow-faced, aged man with fixed eyes, staring vacantly.

Dr. Cree laid a fat thumb on a spot immediately above J. B.'s nose, between the ragged eyebrows.

" My distinguished friend, if I may call him so," the doctor said distinctly, " is now in that state of lucidity which I wished to create. For him there exist only two people in the world—himself and his physician—I and he. He can hear no other voice than mine. He can see no other face. Between the two of us we have only one will—mine. Do you hear what I say, Mr. Macraw?"

"I hear," a cavernous voice repeated after him.

"All right, my distinguished friend!"

The doctor walked to and fro, stretching himself, smiling.

"It's getting easier," he remarked to Ada. "Only ten minutes this time. The first day it took me thirty minutes to get him into a simple lethargic state. Well? Are they here?"

Hiram Jenks got up and approached the bed where J. B. lay. He looked at the expressionless face and the fixed eyes.

"He can't hear me?" he asked.

"He can hear no voice but mine," replied Dr. Cree decisively; "and what he hears I can wipe out of his brain, as with a sponge."

"The poor old fellow looks bad," Hiram said slowly. "Come on—get it over."

"Don't be foolish! Now this phase—"

"Oh, cut out the cackle, Cree! Your voice makes me sick," Hiram growled, swinging around toward the doctor with frowning eyes.

"Don't be foolish!" repeated the doctor. He was always self-possessed. "Don't be so impatient! But you're quite right—time is passing. Ada, have them brought up. You wait in the next room, please."

There were three doors opening from the operating room. One, facing the window, led to the hall; and to the right and left were doors that gave into adjoining bedrooms. Ada went out by the door to the hall, closing it after her.

During her absence neither Dr. Cree nor Hiram spoke. Both of them watched the motionless figure on the bed, and waited.

The minutes dragged along. When at last the door opened once more, the doctor exclaimed angrily:

"You! Why aren't you in bed? I told you to go to bed!"

It was Claude Allingham. He stood there, cowering.

"Miss Calamy tole me to tell you they's comin'," he stammered out. "I ain't done nothin'!"

"Get to your bed, if you want to keep a white skin on you!"

The boy backed out, his eyes rolling in his head—rolling away from the doctor's threatening scowl and from the corpselike thing, half covered with a sheet, on the operating bed.

As Claude disappeared, there came from the hall a wheezy voice, expostulating, and answering it another voice, nasal and thin.

"Come in, gentlemen," said Dr. Cree, making way.

The gentlemen entered. The first of them was the great Mr. Ogle himself, panting after the effort of climbing the stairs, but smiling broadly. He loomed up in all the twinkle of his jewels, like some fat, unwholesome star.

At his elbow came the other gentleman, Mr. Brine. The little black-jowled whiffler wore neither jewels nor a smile. His look was darkling and hard. He did not acknowledge the doctor's greeting. His first glance went to Hiram Jenks, silent near the bed. Then he examined the old banker, immobile in what seemed to be a strange, open-eyed sleep.

"I want this business put through tonight," he said sharply. "You've had time enough, Cree!"

"I have taken the time I needed," the doctor replied, pulling himself up with a show of dignity.

"Gently!" interposed Mr. Ogle, intervening before Mr. Brine could speak. "Gently! The point is that we are all ready at last—are we not?"

Cree nodded assent.

"Then go to it," said Mr. Brine curtly. "I want that man's signature to those papers, and—"

"Wait, Brine," Mr. Ogle interrupted once more. He was so huge and soft and slow that he seemed to fill and dominate the room. He spoke very clearly. "As legal advisers to Dr. Cree, we happen to be present on this occasion, and that is all. Is that dictaphone on?"

"No," replied Dr. Cree.

"See for yourself, Brine."

"You have the last record," the doctor said. "There's been nothing else."

Mr. Ogle laughed. The gold in his mouth and on his hands and his waistcoat laughed with him.

"It was interesting, and quite sufficient," he said. "The old man was very talkative in his sleep. You did well, Cree! He told everything we need to know. Now I think we can go on. All right, isn't it, Brine? Yes. There is no need of keeping a record of our private conversation."

Again the oily laugh oozed out of him.

Mr. Brine had completed his destruction of the dictaphone. It would never serve again. It had done its work well, recording day by day the secrets that fell in slow monotony from the lips of the old banker, as the man of science bent over him, commanding him to "speak, speak!"

As if under an irresistible spell, J. B. had spoken, letting slip one by one the innermost secrets of his business operations, paying them out as a drunkard drops his coins. The little black dictaphone had done its work in that room of mystery, and it was useless now.

"You are always right, Ogle," commended Mr. Brine, with suspicious glances at Cree and the silent Hiram Jenks. "I hadn't thought of it."

"Mere prudence," Mr. Ogle replied. "Now give Cree the papers. He does it all, our friend Cree. Take them!"

The great Dr. Cree was no longer pompous. The glitter had fallen from him. Even the professional manner, which still draped him, was loose and ragged. He took the folded papers and weighed them, foolishly, in his hand.

"The old fool can write, I suppose?" said Brine.

"He will do whatever I tell him to do," the doctor replied. "He can hear no voice but mine. He is just as he was when you saw him this morning—an automaton. He will sign what I tell him. For all practical purposes he is myself. Tell me what you want."

"Have him sign these."

Dr. Cree went closer to the operating bed, where Mr. Macraw lay unmoving, rigid, with staring eyes. Once more he touched the point on the patient's forehead, and then slowly repeated the passes from the head downward.

"Sit up!" he said commandingly.

The lean old body rose stiffly, the legs swung over the side of the bed, and Mr. Macraw sat erect, with his questioning eyes, like the pathetic eyes of a blind dog, turned toward the man of science. Dr. Cree stooped and picked up a black board from beneath the bed. It was the back of a radiophotographic frame, which was also to serve its purpose. He laid it across J. B.'s knees.

"Take this fountain pen. It is yours," the authoritative voice went on. "You are now at your desk in the bank."

"I am at my desk in the bank," the old man repeated mechanically.

"You see these papers? You have already read them carefully. You know all about them. Now you are going to sign them."

"Now," the banker echoed, "I am going to sign them."

"Of course! That is what you came to the bank to do."

"Of course."

Mr. Macraw unfolded the documents and looked at them with blank eyes, repeating slowly:

"Of—course."

Then he carefully wrote his name, meticulously putting in the tiny dots in the curve of the M which distinguished his bank signature, and had been one of his little secrets. As he affixed each signature and perfected it with the dots, the papers were taken from him, one by one, by Dr. Cree, who handed them to Mr. Brine.

"I think," said Mr. Ogle pleasantly, "that by noon to-morrow the bank of Jenks & Macraw will look like an eggshell after breakfast!"

No one paid any attention to his fat laughter. Brine turned to Hiram Jenks, who had stood near the bed, his hands in his pockets, looking down, apparently indifferent to what was going on.

"It's all up to you now," Brine told him sharply, "and it's all easy going. To-morrow morning you will put this business through at the bank. Remember, you'll not be alone for a moment. I've got you covered—understand? That's why I trust you—as far as I can see you. You needn't worry about anything this old fool will dare to do. I don't think he'll want to do much talking."

At last Hiram Jenks spoke.

"Oh, you can trust me all right—the pair of you! So long as you take care of Cree here, I don't give a damn about it; but what are you going to do with—with old Macraw?"

He looked thoughtfully at the haggard old man, seemingly dead as a mummy, save for the staring eyes.

"Our aged and generous friend," Mr. Ogle said smoothly, "will remain here for a few days longer, I dare say. Cree will see to that. Make a young man of him, Cree!"

"Tie the old fool up," Brine snarled, "and keep him until Thursday. Then let him go. If he wants to talk, why, let him talk!"

"He will remember nothing," replied the doctor.

"Take care of him, Cree," Hiram Jenks said. "I tell you, Brine, I won't have the old man hurt! You hear me? And now let's get out of here. I've had enough!"

He moved toward the hall door, and Mr. Brine went watchfully with him, step for step. The papers were in his hand. Mr. Ogle lingered for a moment, looking at his victim with an unctuous grin on his fat face. It was an evil, mocking grin; but suddenly it was wiped away, and his flabby jowls shook with terror.

There was a yell—the savage and exultant howl of a wolf. It came from the jaws of old J. B. Even as he yelled, he tugged out a revolver from the folds of his dressing gown, and fired again and again. The shots smashed through the window, shattering the glass.

It was as if a sudden cyclone had exploded in the quiet room. There was a typhoon of yells and shots, through which the two dazed lawyers and the moaning Cree were whirled about blindly.

Hiram Jenks took one step toward the hall door, and then darted back as the door was flung open, disclosing heads, surging shoulders, hands with revolvers outstretched. A swift glance showed him that the doors to left and right were also opening—more faces, more hands with menacing weapons.

No fox ever turned quicker than he turned. He dashed straight at the window and literally flung himself through it—going shoulder first through the fangs of the broken glass.

"Get him!" screamed a fierce voice. "Get that young devil! Get him and kill him!"

It was a frenzied old man in purple pyjamas—a furious old man with a bald head and blazing eyes—who burst through the door to the right, dancing with rage, gasping with eagerness. With him Dan Shanahan came running, while behind them hovered the bleached face and wild eyes of Claude Allingham.

(To be concluded in the March number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE*)*

A VILLAGE FAR FROM CITIES

A VILLAGE far from cities
  Has moments like a hymn,
Music made of silences
  And colors melting dim;

A bronze hush at sundown,
  The dusk soft and red,
The twilight like a temple
  Where nothing should be said;

The lush shadows creeping,
  The peace of falling light,
And, flickering, the swallows
  In a dizzy-winged flight.

Above the gentle gables
  The doves' low voices brood;
The village breathes so faintly
  In the hour's beatitude;

And not a word my love says,
  And not a word say I;
For what is there to utter
  When contentment's in a sigh?

Charles Divine

The Irishman

WHY THE RED-HAIRED SON OF PORTUGUESE JOE SILVA RAN AWAY FROM HIS FATHER'S RANCH

By Benjamin Faulkner

THE boy sat on a flat rock, holding a pair of cheap field glasses in a freckled hand. He was a slender lad with dull red hair and a wrinkle between his eyes. He was small-sized for his thirteen years, and his legs were skinny from malnutrition.

As he rose, stood erect on the rock, and placed the binoculars to his eager eyes, a wealth of beauty came into his vision and curved his tight lips in a smile. It was the twentieth time that afternoon he had surveyed the scene, like a warrior overlooking a battlefield. Each time he had smiled, and each time the permanent wrinkle had threatened to erase itself from his troubled brow.

Below him, down the hill, were the yellow and brown buildings of the orphanage, where he lived. The grounds extended over several acres of lawn and garden truck.

Beyond, the lure of the boy's blue eyes, the cities of Oakland and San Francisco lifted stacks and spires on either side of the Bay of the Blessed. The bay, in the distance, was as blue as the summer sky, as blue as Michael's eyes. Through the glass he could behold marvels unimaginable. Sometimes, so intent was his fascination, unnoticed tears flowed down his cheeks and his optic nerve quivered from the strain.

Long piers jutted out into the bay, tracked for electric trains. Red and gold cars sped out over the water, connecting with ferryboats, which moved along a chartless path to the opposite city. Sailing ships veered with the wind, their white sails so many flags of hope to the boy. Warships and cruisers and destroyers lay at anchor, grimly peaceful.

Goat Island, quite close through the binoculars, lifted its barren knob commandingly. Farther out, Alcatraz and Angel Island took on the deep purple of distance. Still farther, the Golden Gate flamed beneath the descending sun.

To Michael, who had never been closer than the Fruitvale hills and his flat rock of observation, the bay and her sister cities encompassed all that he had ever dreamed. The Golden Gate was the gate of the world, and it was open for him to pass through. What lay beyond he did not know. That was a mystic realm of wonderful adventure; but he was awake to the promise of the bay and the Golden Gate. He was eager to set forth upon the path of adventure, so thrillingly near to his impetuous feet, and yet so eternally afar—with the high walls of the orphanage between.

He was interrupted in his dreaming observation by the sharp voice of the eldest of his six younger brothers—Manuel, who was ten years old and very dark-skinned and black-eyed. Manuel was storming fearlessly the unpermitted heights of his brother's hill, utterly sure that the news he brought would avert Michael's quick wrath.

" Mike," he cried, while still some feet away, " our ol' man's here with our new mamma. Come on down!"

" Huh! The ol' man? What's he want?"

The " old man " was their father, whom they had not seen for three years—not since he had placed them in the orphanage, in fact.

Michael had none of his brother's enthusiasm for the meeting. He remembered his father clearly, and the memory was not pleasant. In his child's mind there was an inevitable resentment for the death of his mother. For some obscure but poignant reason he held his father responsible.

And why, after three years of neglect, should Joe Silva suddenly remember his children? He had not even come to see them when little Madeline, the youngest of the eight children, who was only two when her mother died, was very ill with diphtheria. To Michael, stern, dreamy Michael, his father's conduct was inexcusable. He was suspicious of the present visit—suspicious of the new mamma.

He walked slowly down the hill with Manuel, and the frown between his eyes grew deeper step by step. He carried his old field glasses carefully under his arm. They were a prize for his excellent work in the garden, and he treasured them above anything he had ever owned.

The two boys entered the playground where the little inmates of the orphanage, all in the same drab, dusty overalls and dresses, romped in serious imitation of play. In one corner Michael saw three adults, two women and a man. As he approached, he recognized his father. One of the women was the white, starched superintendent, and the other, he judged, was his new mamma.

He observed how happy his father looked, and he compared the healthy, smiling bride with his pale, hard-working mother. There was much bitterness in the lad's heart.

The Silva children, from brown-eyed, lisping Madeline to spindly, adolescent Michael, were grouped around their father. Joe Silva was a huge Portuguese, quite swarthy, and he wore a bristling black mustache. He had been a butcher in Antioch, a small factory town on the upper bay, and his wife had died. Now, he was exultingly telling the superintendent, he had bought a ranch in the hills of Contra Costa, had remarried—his bride smiled happily at this point in the narrative—and was going to take his family there to live.

The children betrayed their delight in the recovery of their papa and the acquisition of a new mamma, and Madeline clung lovingly to the arm of her stepmother. It was a happy family group, but Michael was not a part of it. He was stiff and awkward in his greetings, and his red hair contrasted strangely with the dark skins of the others.

He was the only red-haired Silva. Even Madeline, whose eyes were hazel brown, almost gray at times, had brown hair. The others were dark as Mexicans, and their hair was black.

There was more to set Michael apart than his coloring. He was the eldest of the children, and he alone remembered his mother—with the memory that never dies. He sensed his isolation in the midst of his family, and there was a gruff hesitancy in his manner.

Even when the superintendent, who liked him but had never quite got under his skin, told Michael's father that his field glasses were the reward of good gardening, he was self-conscious, and did not like his father's hearty slap and his stepmother's smile.

" Goo' boy, Mike! On de ranch you raisa da corn. You hava peegs, an' da cheekens, an' a cow. How you like?"

" Sure!" Mike answered, with just a trace of the Irish accent he had acquired from Dick Haggerty, his chum.

" Shure!" mimicked his father. " Da sama red hair! You talka like da Irishman. Say, I bet you forget all de Portugee you know, huh?"

Joe Silva laughed. He was unusually good-natured and happy. It was his honeymoon. He turned to his bride and laughed.

" Well, Maria, we teach him on da ranch, huh?"

" Yeh, up in da hills!" she smilingly agreed.

" You Irishman!" Joe mirthfully christened his eldest son.

It was a name that stuck, emphasizing the differentiation of the boy. At first it annoyed him, but after a while he decided that he liked it.

II

From the road, hugging the hillside along Marsh Creek, the ranch extended between a tributary brook and the Diablo foothills. In the foreground emerald vineyards spread over the black earth. A small orchard—apples, pears, prunes, and figs—dotted two level acres behind the house. The hither uplands were in barley and wheat.

Beyond, cattle grazed knee-deep in wild oats, and drank from cool springs, plentiful in mineral salts. White oaks and live oaks grew in the pasturage, laden with rich acorns for fattening hogs and festooned with beards of mistletoe.

The whitewashed house, ideally shaded by a gigantic white oak on the left and a spreading fig tree on the right, was set off from the road by an acre of Mission grapes, sixty years old, and by the waters of Marsh Creek, ages older. Bushy willows grew in the creek bed, and cottonwood trees rustled their spangled leaves in the breeze. Near the road a single eucalyptus, planted by the winds of chance, stood like a sentinel. A clump of Japanese bamboo had sprung up around it.

The barn, also whitewashed, was fifty yards behind the house, and could be reached by a wagon road between rows of olive trees, or by a path under an arbor of Sweetwater grapes. The sun rose late over a steep hill in front of the house, and bathed Mount Diablo in crimson fire when it set. Later, at twilight, Diablo's dome was a purple barrier beneath the evening star, a dark, forbidding bulk.

Often, at sundown, Michael climbed the highest hill and gazed westward through his binoculars to the mountain. He had lost none of his passion for distance in the months of his life on the ranch, and the prisoning walls of the mountain, obstructing his vision, kindled his desire to know what lay beyond.

He had been on the ranch for nearly a year, but the entrancing wonders of San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate were living memories to him. He had not forgotten their promise. He longed passionately for the time when he could go forth to explore the world.

He was not deaf to the delights of the ranch, by any means. During the preceding winter, when the creek rose with the rain, he had speared salmon at night with a torch and a two-pronged fork, Indian fashion. The summer before he had mastered his father's double-barreled shotgun, and had hiked over miles of brush-covered land, alert to the whirring wings of quail or the startled leap of a cottontail. Often he trailed coyotes with his dog Carlo, a bloodthirsty beast said to be the son of a Klondike malemute, and once or twice he had wounded one, but never mortally.

Michael was the general utility man on the ranch. His father regarded the boy's thirteen years as maturity, and gave him a man's work to do. All the chores fell to him. It was his duty to milk the three cows night and morning; to feed the horses, the chickens, the ducks, and the pigs; to pick fruit in season, and pack it in boxes for sale in Antioch.

During the grape season, in September, he got up early enough to have his chores done before breakfast, and in the vineyard he picked his daily ton of grapes, in sixty-pound boxes, along with his father. At night his small muscles ached so terribly that he could not sleep but he stuck to it manfully all through the month. Afterward there was wine to be made — hundreds of gallons of it—and then there was the winter's wood to be chopped.

At the Silvas' each adult had his or her pint of wine at dinner and supper. Michael, alone of the children, was thus honored; but then he was a man. He had finished his schooling, having completed the grammar grades at the orphanage, and he did a man's work in the field. Although he disliked the taste of wine, he drank it; to fail in that rite of manliness would have been to incur the combined scorn of Joe and Maria. Sometimes he felt sick from the wine, but an hour's toil under the hot sun unfailingly renewed his eager sobriety. It had the effect, though, of making him nervous, more feverish than ever to get away—out into the world.

Except for the hard work, the effect of which he could not understand, Joe was kind enough to the boy. He treated him with the rough good humor of comradeship. He told him some of the coarse stories he picked up in the Antioch saloons; but Michael blushed with the strange cleanness of adolescence, and suffered Joe's laughter with frowning disapproval.

Maria, too, was kind, not only to Michael, but to all the children. She cared for their clothes and health efficiently, and they were better off than at the orphanage. Little Madeline, especially, was the well beloved of her new mamma, whom she loved in turn with the facile affection of early childhood.

Michael, however, never quite forgave Maria for usurping the place of his mother. It was as if he had no comprehension of the fact of death, and was unable to accept the consequent changes.

III

DESPITE his hard toil, Michael's scrawny frame was filling out, his muscles were growing long and supple. His bony little breast and skinny legs grew stouter and better equipped for the work and play of the ranch. During the month of August he had many hours to himself. With the wheat and barley harvested and the grapes still unripe, there was no routine of labor to keep him occupied.

Often, after he had done the morning chores, he took his shotgun, his field glasses, and his dog Carlo, and walked for miles through the manzanita and laurel.

Sometimes he followed the creek toward its myriad mountain sources, and made a long detour back over cow trails to Sycamore Springs, an abandoned summer resort. Usually, however, he maneuvered to come home by way of the Gomez ranch, for old Pedro Gomez was Michael's best friend, and the tales he told were worth walking miles to hear.

Pedro was over seventy, an old sailor of the pirate tradition. He had been a boat steerer of whaling crews on both the Atlantic and the Pacific. His seaman's career started from New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he was shanghaied two hours after innocently landing from his native Azores. The action of all his stories started in New Bedford, but soon transcended that limitation, and scarred the seven seas with gory fights and torrential storms.

Pedro was an old sea lion, with a black mane lightly sprinkled with gray. He stood well over six feet in his shoes, and his arms and shoulders were as round and erect as those of a man of forty. Only his brown, leathery face, seared by the suns of seventy summers, gave an impression of age; and his eyes, gray blue below shaggy black brows, belied that impression.

For thirty years Pedro had lived in the hills of Contra Costa. There was hardly anything that he had not experienced, and to Michael he was a living spring of adventure. He had been everywhere, he knew everything, it seemed to the lad, and the disparaging gossip that he had heard about Pedro he put down to the envy of the countryside.

Of course, Pedro drank a good deal of wine, and usually it required several glasses to start a story; but Michael thought they were the most wonderful stories in the world. He even drank with the old man, at his insistence, just to get a story. Sometimes, dreaming in the wine haze, Pedro imagined himself in some water front drinking place with a fellow seaman, and called the boy "mate." Then Michael's thirsty little soul swelled with wonder, and he gulped another glass of distasteful red wine.

Pedro was alone most of the time—for which Michael was thankful, because he could visit the old man. Pedro's wife, a half-breed Mexican indigenous to the hills, spent most of her time with one or another of her ten grown children, coming home only at harvest time or in the grape-picking season. The children, after the manner of country children, had married and settled down in neighboring towns. They had lost interest in the ranch, where, as Pedro expressed it, they had grown big and strong and fat.

The old fellow was lonely and proud on his hill ranch—almost as lonely as Michael, who felt a keener, deeper isolation among his fellows. Michael admired the old man profoundly, and tried to spend every spare hour in his company, going to the Gomez ranch as casually as he could in order to avoid the all too ready laughter of Joe and Maria.

Michael could not bear ridicule. It flamed his freckled cheeks and bristled his red hair. Of course, it was Joe's favorite manner of speech.

The boy had long since got over being called "the Irishman," as Joe habitually denominated him. He had grown used to it. Moreover, after much thought, he had decided that somehow he was Irish. He had never bothered to learn even rudimentary Portuguese after he left the orphanage.

Of the children, only little Madeline, a chubby baby girl, interested him. He had a vague, negative feeling for his father; there was no sense of relationship in it. He liked Pedro Gomez far better, he thought.

Occasionally he wondered what he would have done had he been Pedro's boy. He was torn between a son's duty to such a father and the eternal lure of the world. He came to no decision in the matter, but hit upon a romantic compromise. Had he been Pedro's boy, he would have limited his wanderings to a very few years, and then he would have come back to care for the old man. Joe Silva did not need him, was nothing to him. There was no one to hold him in the hills when all the world was calling. He was glad that he would soon be free.

Perhaps there really was something of the spirit of the eternal Celt in Michael. Irishmen have been everywhere, forever. Long ago, perhaps, the blue Azores had been visited by some errant son of Erin, and Michael, with his anomalous blue eyes and red hair, had actually inherited the beauty-engendered, dream-spun poetry of the Celt.

He walked slowly down through Pedro's vineyard to the house, one day in August. Ground squirrels scampered mischievously across the road, and brown lizards ran unnoticed over rocks as dun as themselves.

The boy was gloomy, thoughtful. In a month he would be fourteen years old, and the great world was as far away as it had been a year ago.

At fourteen Pedro had been a man of the world—or, rather, a cabin boy of the world of ships. The comparison made Michael restless. Sometimes, on the other hand, he was doubtful of himself, acceptant of his lot, hesitant about setting forth. At such times he liked to hear Pedro talk.

Pedro dozed in the scant shade of a young pepper tree, his long legs extended comfortably, and his hand within reach of a jug of red wine. He gripped a bone-stemmed pipe between his strong old teeth, and cursed in hydra-tongued profanities the flies that buzzed around him.

Michael threw himself down without a word, squatting on his bare feet.

"Hello, boy!" Pedro greeted him in his slow, heavy speech. "Too bad you no come by hour ago. Den we killa damn coyote. Ol' Pedro can' shoot straight no more. Damn coyote eata my cheeken."

He poured a cup of wine and passed it to the boy. Michael hesitated.

"Go ahead! A leetle drink good thing for a boy. Maka good man!"

Michael drank. Then Pedro poured a cup for himself, and drank it.

"Yes, by Gar, you be here hour ago," he reiterated, "an' we killa damn coyote. You kill him—I skin him. Den you getta da bounty—dat's two dollar an' a half—an' I sell the skin for two dollar an' a half. How's dat, huh?"

"I never killed one yet. I wish I could! They been gettin' the ol' man's chickens, too. You get five dollars for one, huh?"

"Yeh, five dollar—two an' a half for da kill, two an' a half for da hide."

The old man laughed mirthlessly at the thought of the lost five dollars. Overhead a daring hawk circled, with a keen eye for the white poultry beneath. From the vineyard came the rustling of quail, and from the barn the incessant cooing of doves. The day was as still as a becalmed ship in the South Pacific. There was no wind, no movement of the air. The sky was deep azure, with here and there a flock of clouds, feathery and white, like the sea foam.

Something of the wonder of the day stole over the old man. After another cup of wine for himself and one for Michael, he was back in New Bedford, embarking in the Lottie Bennett for the Solomon Islands.

The tale of the Lottie Bennett was a pointless narrative, but it made up in color what it lacked in consistency. Old Pedro was a melodramatist, and his character held Michael's interest for hours. Many times were the wine cups filled during the progress of the tale. Pedro's thick speech grew thicker, while Michael's eyes became glassy with the intensity of his feelings.

It takes a long, long time for a windjammer to make the Solomon Islands around the Horn from New Bedford, especially with a mutinous crew in stormy weather. It took almost as long for Pedro to narrate the log of the Lottie Bennett. He never quite finished, for at the point of Michael's liveliest enjoyment the old man fell back and snored.

The boy knelt over him in a fever of excitement. He wanted passionately to learn what had happened to the brave captain of that sturdy bark, but his efforts to arouse Pedro were futile. The potent wine had utterly dumbed the old sailor.

With Michael it had precisely the opposite effect. He was on fire with eagerness and delight. The wine and the story together had wrought their marvel of alchemy within him, transmuting the tawdry brass of his desire into the gold of romance.

Mad visions flamed before him, and he ran after them, shouting. The great purple barrier of Diablo seemed quite near and easily surmountable. He strode toward it resolutely, bent upon conquering it.

Suddenly, as he seemed to be approaching it, he saw the evening star, high above the dark dome of the mountain, and infinitely distant. He was chilled with a vague dread. He somehow sensed the lateness of the hour, remembered vaguely his familiar duties.

As he turned, perplexed by the inexplicable flight of time, he was confronted by Joe, hardly recognizable, like a creature from a strange world.

"Why the hell you no milka da cow?" Joe shouted, but the words reached Michael in a distant rumble, a weird cacophony. "You damn Irishman!"

No answer came from the boy. As his father came nearer, his blue eyes were wide in glassy wonder and his tight mouth was open dumbly, piteously.

"Drunk, by Gar! You damn Irish peeg! I feex you!"

Joe's heavy fist struck his son's jaw, and knocked him to the ground. Michael huddled limp at his feet, making no sound, and the man's boot found a soft place to kick. Pedro snored on, oblivious, dreaming of the Lottie Bennett.

Joe picked the boy up and carried him, thrown carelessly over his shoulders, to the spring wagon he had driven. He tossed the body into the wagon and lashed his horses to a gallop. When he got to the ranch, he flung the boy into a pile of hay, put his horses up for the night, and went to the house.

All night the boy lay there, a mute, unconscious heap.

IV

Several days later, when Michael's sickness had left him a chastened yet somewhat dubious spirit, Joe, having relented of his severity in punishing a fault which he himself had often enough confessed, suggested that the boy should take the shotgun and try to get some quail.

Michael looked at his father doubtfully. He was unable to comprehend Joe's strange admixture of cruelty and kindness. Since the wild night with Pedro, only a brilliant hallucination of which remained, he had gone about like a whipped dog, expecting a kick at any moment.

Underneath there had been a dim, amorphous resentment. He never could understand that he had been sordidly drunk on that beautiful, dream-lit evening. There was a latent scorn in his attitude toward Joe, whose execrations of Pedro, Michael's beloved hero, were frequent and forcible.

However, he took the gun, and, with Carlo at his heels, started off.

" Go up Sycamore way," Joe called, as he crossed the creek.

" That's where I was going," Michael answered.

But, he thought to himself, Joe wanted to keep him away from Pedro. They—in that plural he combined his whole hateful world—they thought he would go back and get drunk. They thought he wanted to get drunk. He spat.

" Hell!" he muttered.

It was early evening. The sun had set on the far side of the mountain, and, beyond, the boy could picture its dying glory in the waters of the Golden Gate; but the bulk of Diablo was real, and seemed hopelessly insurmountable.

The boy was consumed with yearning to get away. He felt the urge of the waiting world; yet the day of departure was as uncertainly distant as ever. Behind the prisoning hills, hedged about by cruel jailers, he felt himself held back from the eternal legacy of wanderers.

He trudged along the dusty road, kicking up clouds with his bare toes, glad of the chance to be alone. A cottontail ran scot-free before his loaded gun, and twice quail whirred noisily in clumps of wild rose.

He looked at his bare feet and frowned. There was the trouble. He had no shoes—he wouldn't have another pair until grape-picking season; and, he admitted ruefully, he couldn't go without shoes.

As it began to grow dark, he sensed the subtle loveliness of the night. As a child he had never feared the dark, and now he wished that he might sleep under a sycamore, with no bed but moss and willow boughs, and with the sound of falling water for a lullaby.

The full moon was rising over the eastern ridge. In the west glowed the evening star. Without rabbit and without quail, but with the more precious game that comes to the hunters of Diana, the Irishman turned back toward the ranch.

He had not gone fifty yards, however, when a commingled barking and yelping told him that Carlo, ever valiant, had cornered a coyote. At first he could see only a dark cloud of dust, but a moment later two furry bodies stood forth in bristling combat. Carlo was the larger, but older, and not so quick. His wild cousin was cowardly, but more strategic. They leaped for each other's throats with indistinguishable growls, and rolled against the barbs of the wire fence.

The boy raised his gun to fire, but in the mêlée it was impossible to take aim at the coyote without risk of hitting the dog, Michael's friend of many months. He tossed the gun aside, and chose a manzanita club from a brush pile near the fence.

Carlo had the coyote by the throat. He clamped his old teeth with all the strength of his domesticated jaws; but he was losing his hold. The sly coyote rested while the dog weakened, and Carlo's strength was going fast.

Taking a good aim, Michael smashed the club over the coyote's head. A sickening quiver, and the animal stretched out stiff, with Carlo tenaciously clinging to his windpipe.

The boy leaned on his club like a young

caveman. Carried away by the adventure of the moment, he had not recognized its significance; but suddenly it flashed upon him that here was his opportunity. Hadn't Pedro said that coyotes—pelt and bounty—brought five dollars a head?

With an affectionate hug for Carlo, he set to work to skin the animal and make it ready for market. His knife was long and sharp, and he had helped Joe butcher hogs. He hacked the skin a little in places, but it was a good job quickly done. When he finished, he dragged the hide in the dust of the road, and then folded it up and took the most direct cow trail for Pedro's ranch.

The moon cast a flickering light on the trail. It was rough and steep walking, and the boy hurried at such a pace that his bare feet were sore and bleeding. Carlo trotted proudly at his heels.

Pedro's gray ranch buildings huddled ghastly in the moonlight. Michael came upon them suddenly out of a clump of live oak and wild rose. He was tired and hot from the climb, and the weight of the gun and the hide had grown prodigious. He paused for a moment to wipe the dirt and moisture from his brow, and gave a sigh of joy as he caught sight of a dim light in the old sailor's house.

Pedro came out, summoned by barking dogs. Michael dropped the coyote pelt at the old man's feet.

" Say, Pedro, have you got five dollars?" he asked.

" Well, boy!" Pedro replied slowly. " Yes, I guess I got it."

" Well, listen! There's the hide of a coyote I just killed, an' I got to have five dollars. Will you give me the money? Then you can collect the bounty and sell the hide, when I'm gone."

There was a keen eagerness in the boy's tone, and Pedro sensed that to-night was the last chance he would have to help his young friend.

" Sure, boy, I do dat," he finally decided, and entered the house.

In a moment he came out and handed Michael a bright five-dollar gold piece. The boy looked at it—he had never owned one before—and tied it securely in the tail of his cotton shirt.

" Thanks, Pedro! Say, I'll write you—when I'm on a ship!"

The bright blue and the gray blue eyes met, and in the exchange of glances each witnessed an idealization of himself. The moment passed, and again they were an inarticulate boy and an illiterate old sailor; but theirs was a more subtle sympathy than can be expressed in words. It was as eternal as the sea itself; it was the vow the sea's lovers keep.

V

At three o'clock next morning Michael stole softly from the side of his brother Manuel, and crept into his clothes. In ten minutes he was on the road to Mount Diablo—and beyond.

He passed through the town of Clayton in the gray dawn, following the mountain road. A bank of fog enveloped him, bearing the tang of the ocean and screening the valley from his view; but he knew that in crossing Diablo he was crossing his greatest barrier.

He arrived in Concord by half past eight. There he spent half of his five dollars for a pair of shoes. Before leaving the ranch he had slipped a handful of dried figs into his pocket, and they served as breakfast.

Joe, he thought to himself, would miss his work in the vineyard, but Manuel was getting pretty big, and could take his place.

" In a month," he said bitterly, " they won't know I ever lived—an' they won't care!"

Half a mile west of Concord he flagged an automobile going toward Oakland. The driver stopped, took on his queer passenger, and sped on his way again. In two hours they had swept through the valley, with its fruit and nut orchards and its rich meadows, through the tunnel road, and were gliding swiftly along the boulevards of Oakland's suburbs.

" Where you goin'—Frisco or Oakland?" the man asked Michael.

" Frisco," the boy replied.

" All right! Stay right here, and we'll cross together on the ferry."

In half an hour Michael stood on the upper deck of a Creek Route ferryboat, gazing out over the bay to the barren knob of Goat Island. The fog had lifted, and out beyond was the Golden Gate, concealed by the islands of the bay. Like an admiral on the bridge, he placed his binoculars to his eager blue eyes and stared until the tears flowed down his cheeks.

He had surmounted all barriers to come to the sea. Already it had begun to fulfill the wonderful promise it had made to a little red-haired Irishman a year before.

Pilgrim's Progress

THE MYSTERY OF THE LAND SEEKER WHO WANTED A LEVEL LAWN IN NORTHERN ALBERTA

By John Holden

A FORMER bookkeeper, struggling through his first season of homestead life in northern Alberta, looks kindly upon chance visitors. In the first place, they afford a perfectly legitimate excuse to sit on a log, and when a fellow is racked by the conflicting claims of a conscience which tells him that he should not rest and a tired back which demands that he shall, that means a lot. Then there is always the chance that another city serf may be lured from his seven hours a day of office slavery to the glorious but blister-raising independence of the homesteader. A brotherly act of that sort comforts one wonderfully when each foot is weighted with a hundred pounds of exhaustion.

Therefore, when I beheld a stranger trudging across my spring plowing, I sank down gratefully upon a log and endeavored to recollect as many " back to the land " arguments as possible.

" Good morning," said the visitor. " This is nice rich soil you've got."

I knew immediately that he was a land seeker, and my heart sang, as a poet would say. The signs were unmistakable — the glad light in his eyes as he gazed up at the fleecy clouds, the dilating of his nostrils as he drank in the clean, fresh air, the way he took off his hat to let the warm sun beat down upon him.

His appearance, too, betrayed the city land enthusiast—the immaculate khaki suit that no farmer ever wears, the high laced boots, the shell-rimmed eyeglasses, the broad-brimmed hat that is invariably worn by homesteaders who parade the pages of " back to the land " literature, but never by real ones. He was a youngish man with sharp features and the spidery physique of men who win high-jumping contests at college athletic meets.

" This is the best soil in the world," I told him.

I did not really think it was quite so good as all that, but when one lives in a country of boosters it is only etiquette to adopt the current style in conversation.

" A bit rough and wooded, though, isn't it? Not like the open prairie land farther south."

" Yes, but the brush is easily cleared." Conscience almost impelled me to add: " If you find it easy to do hard work," but I throttled the virtuous impulse.

" You seem to be pretty close to town."

" Sure—only two miles out. That's the advantage of taking up land in northern Alberta. In the prairie district farther south one can't get a place closer to a railroad town than thirty miles."

" Is there any land left for homesteading hereabouts?"

" Plenty," I informed him; " but of course not so close in as this."

" How close?"

" Five or six miles, I should say."

He sat down beside me in rather a discouraged manner.

" That is, unless you want to take up a homestead that's four-fifths worthless," I added. " The quarter section right next to me is open for entry, but only about thirty acres out of the hundred and sixty can be cultivated. You see, it's right on the Athabasca River. For a quarter of a mile back from the water it rises in hillocks to a plateau that's as clear and level as a board. Dandy view, too; but back of the plateau there's a swamp, so there isn't enough level land to make it worth while."

To my amazement, the pilgrim jumped to his feet.

" You say there are thirty good acres on the plateau?" he exclaimed.

"About that—yes."

"Lead me to them! Oh, man, let me see those acres! That's just what I'm looking for."

I appraised the fellow more carefully. He looked normal—for a pilgrim; but of course one cannot always go by superficial appearances.

"Very well," I consented. "I'm surprised, though, that you are thinking of wasting your homestead rights on only thirty acres of land. You can't make a living growing grain on that much. This isn't the East, you know, where you can grow anything and everything."

"I'll make a living, all right!" he proclaimed joyously.

II

We proceeded toward the quarter section, which, to my knowledge, had been rejected by at least forty previous homeseekers. On the way I sought to learn the reason for his enthusiasm over such a comparatively insignificant plot of good land.

"Maybe you're going in for truck farming?" I queried.

"No."

"Chicken farming?"

"Not a chance! No farming of any kind."

"Perhaps you just want to live there and enjoy the scenery?"

"No—I've got to work for a living."

"Thinking of boring for oil?"

"No."

"Some real estate scheme, maybe?"

"Never thought of such a thing."

"Railroad right of way?"

"Never."

"Summer resort?"

"How absurd!"

"You're not going to make the place into a ball park, or a picnic ground, or anything like that?"

"Heavens, no! How could I make a living out of a picnic ground?"

I did not wish to appear inquisitive. I hate inquisitive people; so I remained silent for a while. Then I inquired in a casual manner if he meant to erect a factory, or a pulp mill, or anything else on the river bank.

"It's only the level ground back from the water that interests me," he said.

Since my politeness forbade me to come right out and ask him what he *did* want it for, I only remarked:

"Well, people will ask me what your business is, and when I can't tell them they'll be suspicious of you."

The pilgrim made no reply whatever. He just grinned at me in a queer way; and presently we arrived at the practically worthless homestead.

I rather expected him to rave about the beautiful view, because visionary land seekers always do when they can; but to my surprise he merely remarked that it was nice. About the swamp he made no remark whatsoever.

What he did wax enthusiastic about, however, was the levelness of the few acres that could be cultivated. Personally, I can grow wheat just as well on land that slopes a trifle, but to hear that pilgrim talk one would think that flatness is as necessary in a farm as in a billiard table. When we came to a slight depression, he wanted to know if he could hire me to fill it in for him. When I consented, he clasped my hand as if I had dragged him from a watery grave.

"You must be planning bowling greens or lawn tennis courts," I remarked; but he just haw-hawed in that crazy way of his.

"And the remarkable thing is that there isn't even a berry bush growing on it!" he remarked ecstatically. "There's just long grass that can easily be cut. Maybe you'll be good enough to mow it for me—yes? I'll let you keep the hay, and I'll pay you besides."

I consented. The pilgrim told me that his name was Horace Busby, and that he meant to file on that invaluable quarter section—that's what he called it—just as soon as he could get back to the land office.

He did, too. In a few days he brought lumber and a carpenter out to his place, and soon he was living on it in a style that was rather too luxurious for any honest-to-goodness homesteader who meant to earn title to his quarter section by the sweat of his brow.

I cut his hay for him, and the way he wanted it cut was as mysterious as everything else about him. He insisted that I should set the cutter as close to the ground as possible, so that the remaining stubble would be only about one inch high, instead of three or four inches, as is customary. He had to have it raked as clean as a carpet, too. The result was nice to look at—almost like a huge, level lawn, in fact; but so far as utility was concerned, I could not see that his level tract had been improved.

Naturally it was exasperating to reside next to a human conundrum, but in Busby's case there were compensations. He paid me generously to smooth out the few rough spots on his thirty acres; he possessed a library, which he placed at my disposal; and in various other ways he proved to be a good neighbor. It seemed only reasonable that I should reciprocate by taking him to town with me on the night of the homesteaders' ball. And, having arrived there, what was more natural than I should introduce him to Jean Horton?

III

JEAN, I might say, is the most desirable girl in all the West, bar none. She has every good quality that any poet ever ascribed to his sweetheart, or any press agent ever attributed to a popular actress. Once she told me that some day she would give my homestead the once-over, and would let me know if she wished to take possession of it, with me thrown in as chattel in chief.

"Isn't your new neighbor an interesting man?" she remarked to me, after she danced with him the first time.

"I suppose so," I agreed.

"So different from other men!"

"Yes—he's a queer bird."

"Queer?" Jean looked at me in a way that I did not like. "I believe you are belittling Mr. Busby."

"Not at all," I denied. "If he wants to throw away his homestead rights on thirty acres of land, when he could just as well secure five times that much, it's his own business; but it's rather a queer thing to do, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily," Jean replied in rather a frigid tone. "It shows that he is original, and different from other men."

"So are the inmates of the provincial asylum."

"I'm surprised at you, Tom," she said.

When I asked her to dance, she remarked that she was tired, and suggested that I might get her some punch.

I did, and when I returned Jean was talking to my mysterious neighbor in a manner that was altogether too animated for my comfort.

After she recovered from her weariness—and really I couldn't see what she had to be weary about, for it was quite early in the evening—she danced quite as often with Busby as with me, and talked to him oftener. So that, while it was a pleasant occasion for Busby and Jean, it was not so good for Tom Jones, which is the name I write on my I.O.U's.

After the night of the ball I spent a week or so in town, and did not see much of Busby. My spring seeding was done, and there was a chance to make good pay working on the scows which were being built in Rodiscaw by the dozen that spring; so I left my wheat crop to the care of nature and temporarily became a wage earner.

As newspaper readers are doubtless aware, oil had been discovered in northern Alberta, away up at Fort McKay, and fortune hunters were pouring into that country in droves, just as they had poured into the Klondike twenty-five years before. Some went by way of the Peace River, and there was talk of transporting a fortunate few by airplane; but most of the hopeful ones floated down the Athabasca River in scows. Had it not been for Jean, I might have given up my land claim and taken a flyer at it myself.

I earned enough dollars to pay the more pressing of my bills in town, and then I returned to my homestead. It was still there, and Mother Nature had looked after the wheat in a satisfactory manner; so I sauntered down to my western boundary, where I could see what my mysterious neighbor had been doing in my absence.

It was plenty! First I sighted a lawn mower leaning up against his shack. Then, looking around to see where Busby had been using the machine, I sighted extra smooth spots at intervals of about two hundred yards all around his thirty acres. I walked to the nearest one, which had been newly planted with grass seed, and in the center of it I found a small cup sunk in the ground.

Then I knew what he was up to. The idiot had laid out a golf course!

I walked to his shack, and found him sitting on the shady side, reading a book.

"Hello!" I said. "Now I know why you took up this place. You're in search of health. You want to get away from the crowds to where you can loaf and read and practice up on your golf game."

"Tut, tut!" he said, and laid down his book with a grin. "There's nothing wrong with my health. Besides, I'm not here to loaf, but to make a living."

"Maybe you want to practice all day at golf so that you can become a professional player?" I ventured.

"On such a course as that, with no bunkers, no rough spots, no hazards of any kind? Don't be absurd, Jones!"

Of course it was none of my affair what his business was; but mysteries annoy me, so I thought hard, and presently a new explanation came to me.

"I know!" I exclaimed. "You're an author. You want a quiet place to work—want to get the homestead atmosphere and put it in a novel."

The fellow shook his head.

"Wrong again, old chap! Every author carries a typewriter, and if you can find one around these diggings I'll give it to you."

He tossed his book aside, and I glanced at the title. It was an inconsequential adventure story, so it was evident that he was not a student. He went inside his shack and came out with a bag of golf clubs.

"Care to try a round?" he said.

"Not if I know it!" I declined. "Any time I want exercise, all I've got to do is to take an ax and clear a little more of my land."

"Mine's all cleared—all I want cleared."

He laid his little white ball down and hit it a lick that sent it soaring toward the first hole. He walked to it, and with two more strokes he put it in the cup.

"I really ought to make the course a little harder," he said. "Wonder how I could! Pile up some brush between the holes, eh?"

I agreed that he could handicap himself a little in that way, and then I went home. Golf on a homestead! It indicated nothing short of sheer insanity, and yet it was hard to believe that there was anything wrong with Busby's mentality. Queer he undoubtedly was, but I recollected that Edison and Marconi and the Wrights were once considered queer too.

IV

CERTAINLY the Rodiscaw girls, including my Jean, did not think Busby insane, as I quickly learned when I made a few belittling remarks about his golf course down in the village that evening.

"Golf!" Jean clasped her hands and rolled her eyes heavenward in an ecstatic manner. "Isn't that grand? To think that our village has a golf course! I've always wanted to learn the game, and now I'm going to!"

When Jean makes up her mind to do a thing, she usually does it; so I was not surprised, a few days later, to see her and Mabel Price on their way to the mysterious homestead. That was bad enough; but what really got my ibex, as the saying is, was the fact that day after day they took a short cut to the links through my homestead, where they usually stopped long enough to make ungracious remarks about my method of making a living.

According to Sunday school and copy book maxims, an honest toiler is a pretty good citizen, and deserves to be looked up to, even if his hands are incrusted with soil and his shirt is wet with perspiration; but you can't make the ordinary girl, even in the homestead country, believe that. White flannel trousers and nothing to do win women there, the same as elsewhere; the idea being, I suppose, that the idle fellow who continues to dine regularly must possess a superior quality of gray matter.

At least, that seemed to be Jean's way of looking at it, as I gathered from casual remarks such as—

"Mr. Busby doesn't have to work so hard as you!"

"If you'd use your head more, Tom, probably you could use your back less!"

And then, after a few more choice epigrams like that, the girls would saunter along to the pilgrim's lawnlike thirty acres, with its pretty view, its cool breeze from the river, and its neat shack, which had no ugly, work-suggesting implements lying around it. I didn't need field glasses to see that Busby welcomed them like a lord of the manor.

They would worry their overgrown marbles along from one grass plot to another, with little shrieks and giggles of joy that I could hear quite distinctly between the strokes of my ax. After an hour or so of golf, they would loll around in Busby's easy chairs and sip the lemonade that he made for them. A nice sight for a lover who had read a whole library of books on the dignity of toil!

I continued to strain my back and blister my hands within sight and hearing of that sort of thing for a whole week, and then I came to a decision. That Busby loafer was going to quit educating my girl to a life of idleness, if I had to twist the fellow's neck!

The first thing I did was to call on Jim Fielding, who was supposed to be Mabel Price's steady company, just as I was supposed to be Jean Horton's.

"Jim," I stated, "that mysterious guy with the golf course on his homestead is stealing our girls away from us. They go out to his place together and play golf with him every afternoon, and I want to stop them. He may elope with my Jean."

"Your Jean!" said Jim. "You mean my Mabel, don't you?"

"I do not. Surely you don't think anybody would elope with your Mabel when he has an equal chance at my Jean?"

"Well, of all the chumps!" retorted Jim. "To think that your Jean can possibly be compared—"

"All right, all right!" I interrupted. "Never mind which girl is the more attractive. Mine looks like an angel to me, and yours evidently suits you. The point is that one or the other of us is going to become a lonesome old bachelor if we don't make that guy stop charming those girls, with his confounded golf, and his learned lingo, and his mysterious ways. I'm for going to him right now and demanding a full and complete explanation of why he is here, doing nothing on a homestead, and still claiming that he is making a living from it."

"Right!" said Jim. "Let's go!"

And we did.

Busby greeted us with his usual cordiality. It was a bit difficult to make rough remarks in the face of such a greeting, but, after gulping a few times, I managed it.

"Mr. Busby," I said, "your presence here is demoralizing the girls we hope to marry. They used to respect us and look up to us because of the hard work we do; but since you have got them interested in this silly game of pasture pool that you play, instead of swinging an ax like a regular homesteader, they seem to think we are a couple of simps because we, too, can't play with them all day and make a living at the same time."

Busby grinned.

"It was the ladies who came to me and asked me to teach them golf," he said. "I made no effort to get them interested."

"We know that," I conceded. "Still, you've got them so fascinated with your darned mysterious ways that they can't see us at all any more. They think we're a couple of dull plodders. Now we have determined to end this mystery. We don't want to be rough or ungentlemanly, but by the Lord Harry we're going to learn how you make a living here, if we have to wreck your homestead in the process!"

Busby considered this for a moment.

"All right!" he said cheerfully. "I'll show you to-night how I make a living. I'll show you something you people around here never saw before; but you've got to bring the girls, so that they can see too."

"Why the girls?" I demanded.

"Why not? If I'm a smart guy, they'll be interested in seeing something new. If I'm a lunatic, you'll have your chance to show me up."

Jim and I agreed that there was nothing unreasonable about Busby's request; so we drove to town in Jim's Ford, and returned, after supper, with Jean and Mabel to Busby's shack.

V

Busby had not run away, and he was even more cheerful than before—almost as enthusiastic, in fact, as when he had first sighted the level thirty acres. He had an oil can in his hand, and he was going around sprinkling oil on the brush piles that he had placed between the holes of his golf course, and lighting them. When he finished, he had a circle of bonfires burning around the edge of his thirty acres—a rim of fire that shot long tongues of ruddy flame into the blackness of the night and lighted up the place in a weird manner.

"Now we'll wait and see what happens," he said.

It was a beautiful night. Not a breath of air was blowing, and the stillness was broken only by the croaking of frogs in the swamp. No one talked much except Busby. The rest of us were too expectant of things mysterious and startling to talk.

"Aren't you going to do something?" Jim Fielding asked Busby at last.

"Not a thing," said the golfing enthusiast. "I've done my part. Things will either happen now or they won't."

The circle of bonfires continued to burn merrily.

"Talk about suspense! I never saw anything in a play that could beat this," whispered Jean.

"Gee, yes! Ain't it awful?" said Mabel.

Busby looked at his watch.

"Only a few minutes more to wait," he said.

Suddenly we all realized that the croaking of the frogs was not all that we heard. A peculiar humming sound had come into existence so gradually that I could not, for the life of me, have told just when it started. Nor could I tell where it came from. It waxed louder and louder, and then I knew that it came from the sky.

It grew into a deafening roar, and then we discerned a black object, like a gigantic bird, hurtling through the air. It dipped suddenly into the circle of bonfires, and a huge airplane sped over the level ground and came to a stop a few hundred feet from the shack.

All of us jumped to our feet and started toward the machine. On the way Busby chattered out an explanation.

" Now you see why I wanted a level tract of ground close to town," he said. " This is the first station of our new airplane service from Edmonton to Fort McKay, where the great new oil field has been discovered. Thirty acres are plenty, and I amused myself with golf because there was nothing else to do. I filed on this quarter section in order to hold it, but I didn't bother with the usual homesteader's duties because we expect the government will give it to us. Didn't want to reveal our plans before we got the business actually started."

Jim and I said nothing. We felt a bit foolish, to tell the truth; even more so when we overheard the girls making such remarks as—

" Isn't he grand?"

" I knew he was a genius!"

We had a strong suspicion, to say the least, that they were not referring to either Jim Fielding or myself.

In a moment we were beside the big airplane. The pilot climbed out, also a portly gentleman whom Busby addressed as one always addresses an official of his company. Last of all, there stepped from the machine an attractive young woman, who ran up to Busby, threw her arms around him, and kissed him.

" Ladies and gentlemen, my wife," said Busby, in the proud manner of young husbands the world over.

Those simple words removed a burden from my mind, and from Jim Fielding's as well. Nevertheless, Jean still insists that I must lay out a golf course for her before she becomes the mistress of my one hundred and sixty acres of good wheat land.

AN HOUR OF SOLITUDE

Grudge not the hour that I would spend alone
  To make companions of the wind and firs;
Beauty's wide gardens were in silence sown,
  And solitary live her gardeners.

I, too, would till her waste lands and belong
  Where twilight and slow-falling waters weave
The spell turned music in that clear thrush song
  Echoing down the caverns of dim eve.

Where the thin tree line stands for its last fight
  Before the baying wind pack, I would go—
Would hunt the path of brightness to its height,
  And listen to the wisdom of the snow.

They who would wed with beauty walk alone
  To find her loveliness. I'll gladly be
Lonely a little to be beauty's own,
  Kin of the clean and brother to the free.

I shall return with beauty's living flower
  To deck afresh the table of your heart;
Therefore, dear love, begrudge me not this hour
  To seek the stars and walk with them, apart!

T. Morris Longstreth

Times Have Changed

A NOVEL OF UP-TO-DATE ADVENTURE IN THE BOHEMIA AND THE SUBURBIA OF NEW YORK

By Elmer Davis

Author of "The Princess Cecilia," etc.

XXV

IT didn't take Al and Dan very long to get to Oceanmere, but the people at the garage had seen no green and white taxi, and neither had the police—the police, whom Al had boldly visited, feeling that a man who had been arrested and let off twice in the last twenty-four hours was playing in a run of luck.

" What do we do now?" Al demanded gloomily. " Run up and down the streets lookin' for 'em?"

" Hell, no!" replied Dan. " Somebody must have been up and awake when they blew into town. Let's try the ticket agent at the station."

Here they had better luck. The agent hadn't seen a party of four come into town, but he had seen a woman in a *Pierrot* costume and a girl dressed as a Spanish cavalier buy tickets for the Mallard Club station a little after seven o'clock.

" Mallard?" said Dan. " Huh! Do you know it?"

" Sure I know it—know lots of people that belong. There's something on there to-day—water carnival or something."

" Did these girls have any baggage?" Dan asked the agent.

" Didn't see any."

" Neither of 'em happened to be carryin' a quilt?"

" Quilt? Not as I remember."

" And no men with 'em?"

" No."

Dan and Al strolled out upon the brick platform.

" Well, that's something," said Dan. " We can trail your wife, anyway, and you can make her talk."

" Sure I'll make her talk—" Al began, then broke into a whisper: " Look there, Dan! Ain't that one of 'em—the little fat fellow at the ticket window?"

" That sure looks like him," said Dan.

Very softly they sidled up to the door. As they hoped, Blish presently came out on the platform.

" Excuse me," said Dan, walking up to him in what he thought was a nonchalant way. It was really about as nonchalant as the manner of a lion stalking an antelope; and Blish was rather alarmed. " Didn't we see you at the Palette Club dance last night?" Dan inquired.

" Very likely you did," Byron admitted. " I was there."

" Well, where's the big, tall fellow that was with you?"

" Yes, indeed!" Blish exploded. " Where is he? That's what I'd like to know. What do you want with him?"

" I'm the one that wants him," said Al. " He run off with my wife."

" The hell you say! He ran off with my wife, too!"

" Something wrong here," said Dan. " Maybe this is the fellow that run off with your wife, Al."

" Me? Say, one wife is enough for me. If I can't keep my own, there isn't much chance I'd go after another, is there?"

" You were in the gang, though," said Al. " Maybe you know why she's gone down to the Mallard."

" Who's gone down to the Mallard—my wife?"

" No, my wife—Lorna Lockwood."

" Is Lorna your wife?"

" Well, she used to be, till this fellow come between us."

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"Now I told you," Dan interrupted, "that we didn't want to get mixed up with women. Friend — what's your name? Blish? Thanks!—did you see anything of a quilt?"

"Oh, my God, I knew it! You're from headquarters, aren't you?"

Dan and Al looked at each other. This was luck!

"I guess you know where we're from," said Dan. "Your friend not only stole my friend's wife, but he stole that quilt."

"No, I'll swear he didn't!" said Byron eagerly. "I know the cop thought so, when he saw us coming out of Mother McCurdy's; but we didn't. Anyway, I never laid hands on him. He'll tell you that!"

"But about this quilt—" Dan suggested.

"Oh, my friend—"

"What was the name?"

"O'Rell — Mark O'Rell. Say, I'll take back the 'friend.' I forgot for the moment that he'd broken up my home. Mark O'Rell—yes! He said the thing was an old family heirloom."

"So it was," said Dan, improvising; "but not in his family—in my partner's family."

Al nodded confirmation.

"Well, now," said Byron reflectively, "it's funny about Marky. He and I used to be pals, but I hadn't seen him for years, till yesterday. He didn't use to be this way, but I suppose he's changed. I never thought he'd steal a quilt—particularly that quilt. Steal a pretty girl, yes—fair enough; but not a quilt!"

"Well," said Dan, "he stole it just the same. Now suppose you tell us when you last seen it—and my friend's wife."

"Well," Blish explained, "I asked the gang down home for breakfast, see?—Lorna and her cousin and O'Rell. Mark would bring the quilt along. Said he had to take it home with him or something."

"Uh! He carried the quilt in a suit case, didn't he?"

"Yes, yes — that's it — in a suit case. They all came home with me, and then I felt kind of—of tired and sleepy, so I went upstairs before breakfast and went to sleep. When I woke up, an hour or so ago, they were all gone."

"Quilt and all?"

"Quilt and all? Yes, quilt and all. More important, wife and all!"

"But they didn't all go together?" Dan asked.

"No, I should say not! You see, sergeant, my wife was kind of sore that I brought this gang in. She said some things to the girls that were kind of sharp, as I remember; and when I last saw them they looked as if they might get sore and walk out at any moment. Likely that's what they did. I'd asked the whole gang to breakfast—breakfast for five, counting my wife; but when I came downstairs an hour ago, I found the dishes still on the table—breakfast for two! Do you see it? Is the whole thing clear? Now, sergeant, can't you get him for abduction or something?"

"We'll get him for something," said Dan. "So you think this fellow O'Rell stayed behind after the girls left, do you?"

"I know it. My wife left me a note. She's run off with him. Lord knows what they've run off on. I know positively he didn't have any money, and she's always broke—"

"Never mind," said Dan. "I know what they've run off on. They can go quite a ways on it, too. Well, Al, no use our goin' to the Mallard."

"Why not?" said Byron.

"Because, while my partner wants his wife, he wants this fellow worse."

"B-but," Byron sputtered, "he's gone there too!"

"He has?"

"Well, there or near it. See here! He not only took my wife—he took my car. I've asked all over town, and I just found that the car was seen driving out of here—east. There's only one road out of Oceanmere—west to the Merrick Road for New York and the South Shore, east for the Mallard, down the bay. They split at the crossroads, half a mile over the meadows; and my car was seen going east. They probably thought I'd sleep till sundown, and they could look in on the carnival before they went on their way."

"Yes," said Al; "but why should he take your wife to meet my wife, if he's run off with both of 'em?"

"Oh, but he didn't run off with Miss Lockwood. Why, he never met her till yesterday afternoon."

"Yes," said Dan; "but it seems he never met your wife till this morning, and look what he done! He works quick, this fellow! Anyway, he's run off with that quilt. You say he had it all night?"

"Sure he had it. I was with him when he got it from Mother McCurdy's place;

but I thought it was his own, sergeant—honest I did!"

"Lorna didn't have it?" Al broke in.

"Lord, no. She never knew it was there. It was in the suit case all the time."

"Then the fellow has crossed everybody," said Al.

"But he's at the Mallard," Dan added. "We'd better be on our way."

"There's a train in five minutes," said Byron. "I was waiting for it myself. If—if you fellows are sure I didn't have anything to do with—"

"Oh, we're satisfied you're innocent," Dan grinned. "You go after your wife, and we'll go after this fellow O'Rell. If we find 'em together, you grab her and beat it. We'll attend to him!"

At about that time the justice of the peace at Jason's Corner, having finished his dinner, lit a nickel cigar and went out to his rocking chair on the porch to look over the *Evening Telegram,* which had just come out from town. When he had looked hard at the front page, he suddenly leaped from his chair and ran back into the house.

"Myra!" he called. "Myra! Come here!"

His wife emerged, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Myra, there's a piece in the paper about a fellow named Dirty Dan McGarrah. He's one of these here Bolsheviks. He brought a lot of diamonds in from Russia, and the Department of Justice lost track of him just as they were gettin' ready to arrest him. Myra, I'll show you his picture here in the paper, and ask you if you recognize it."

"Why, Henry! That's one of the men you had in here before dinner!"

"Yes," said the justice fiercely, "I guess it is. Likely there's a reward for him, too. Blue serge suit, gray shirt with soft collar, and gray cap, the paper says. That's him! He was in court last night, it seems, but they let him go. I ain't the only one, I guess. He had a witness there in court—Al Keeley. The reporter describes him, too; says he was appareled like the rainbow—had on a brown suit with a green stripe, and a horseshoe pin in his tie."

"Why, Henry! The gentleman that lost his wife!"

"You said it, Myra. Paper calls him 'the notorious forger and confidence man.' Dog-goned if I ever let a speeder go again! But maybe we can get in on that reward yet. Where did they say they were goin'—Oceanmere? While I'm gettin' central, you look up the number of the Department of Justice!"

XXVI

When June Blish drove her car in under the arched gateway of the Mallard Club grounds, and parked it in the long row of machines of all makes and sizes drawn up beside the clubhouse, O'Rell felt more at ease than at any time in this whole series of adventures.

It was a place of peace, this club. Once upon a time it had been a big country estate set down on the edge of the bay, and the club committee had seen to it that it still looked as much as possible like a big country estate. The old homestead, now a restaurant, dance hall, and clubhouse, was surrounded by wide, shady lawns sprinkled with shrubbery and threaded with walks, where benches invited strollers to sit down every few feet and rest. Though there was a bathing pavilion beyond, at the water's edge, and a row of bungalows beyond that, the general impression was still that of a hospitable home entertaining a rather unusually large week-end party.

And that was the way it seemed to O'Rell when they strolled into the clubhouse and June buzzed about, greeting everybody she met. They were all friends here, and they all tried to make him feel at home.

"Poor Byron's ill," June kept explaining. "Yes, isn't it a shame? He did so want to come to-day, but the poor boy has overworked terribly. But you must meet Mr. O'Rell. Oh, yes, one of our oldest friends!"

Presently they were dancing, and O'Rell was content to catch the pleasure of the moment. The suit case, with the quilt, had been checked in the lobby of the clubhouse. The diamonds were still safe in his inner pocket; and he had nothing to do but amuse himself till Lorna and Irene had had time to get back to Wynwood, clear up the mystery, and open the way for him to go home. After that there would be so much trouble that there was no use borrowing any now. He would take Emerson's advice—he would trust himself.

But he hadn't counted on June. After their third or fourth dance, they strolled on the veranda. Ahead of them stretched the shining waters of the bay. The beach and the long pier that reached out from the bathing pavilion were bright with colored caps and bathing suits.

"Let's go in," she proposed. "I'm dreadfully warm. The races won't begin for another hour, and everybody will want to be in bathing suits by that time, anyway. You never can tell when some of these wild men will call for a free-for-all dash for the floats, or something."

"I don't know that I feel very much like it," said O'Rell nervously.

He was thinking about the diamonds. No place to hide them in a bathing suit, and he didn't like to trust them out of his sight.

"Nonsense!" said June. "Can't you swim?"

"Of course I can swim, but—"

"I can borrow somebody's bathing suit that will fit you."

"Does the club possess a safe?" he asked. "I have some valuables—a watch, and so on—"

"Nobody will steal your watch. I'm leaving mine in an envelope at the desk in the pavilion, and my rings, too. They'll be as safe there as anywhere."

Probably they would, O'Rell reflected. For that matter, wouldn't he be better off if somebody stole the diamonds? They weren't his. They could never be his. Their possession meant nothing to him but a rather terrifying responsibility; and the worst of it was that so long as they were in his pocket, he couldn't help thinking of the things he could do if they only were his. That was an unprofitable speculation for a gentleman who was going to have to go back and face his high school the day after to-morrow.

So he marched up to the desk in the pavilion without much regret, stuffed his handkerchief full of jewels into an envelope, sealed it, and gave it back to the negro boy.

"Over a hundred dollars?" the boy asked.

"Well, rather," said O'Rell. "Why?"

"Club ain't responsible over a hundred. You can insure 'em, though."

O'Rell put his hand in his pocket, and then drew it out empty. He couldn't insure anything to-day. He was a pensioner on June's bounty. In any case, he couldn't very well insure this pocketful, for it would take a month's pay.

So he wriggled into the bathing suit that June had borrowed for him—it was a passably good fit—and strolled out on the sand. As he expected, his partner wasn't ready yet, so he wandered down the beach and along the row of steamer chairs, where those who were too old or too fat or too lazy to swim lounged under striped umbrellas and watched the others.

As he passed down the line, a horrified exclamation pulled him around, to stare down under an umbrella into the face of Lorna Lockwood.

"Why aren't you in New York?" he demanded.

"Why didn't you stay in the love nest?" she countered.

"Oh, the party continued after you left. I'm it. Mrs. Blish and I are attending the carnival here. But how about you? And where is—"

"Little poison ivy? Oh, yes, indeed—she's here. She can't swim, but some friends of ours blew her to a one-piece suit of purple silk, and she's been the belle of the beach ever since."

"But why didn't you take her home?" inquired O'Rell.

"Why didn't you save your money, instead of buying off taxi drivers and egg merchants? We didn't have car fare. We had to come down here, where I had friends who wouldn't refuse me breakfast merely because I was all dressed up. From here we phoned the grand news of the rescue of imperiled innocence to the family."

"Then they'll let her come back?"

"You understate it, friend. They'll drag her back, by the scruff of the neck. Uncle and aunt and your village chief of police all got together with some difficulty—I believe the family had gone into town to search the morgue, or something like that—and they're all coming down here to get her."

"The deuce they are!"

"They certainly are," said Lorna, "unless police headquarters has gravely misinformed me. Their train is due in about five minutes. Take a word of friendly counsel, fellow voyager. If you encounter Irene, or *vice versa,* the beans are spilled. If this bunch from your home town finds you and her on the same beach, they'll believe their eyes rather than my golden tongue. In that case you're in for more trouble. If I were you, professor, I'd swim out to that float—yes, the farthest one, away out there in the bay; and I'd stay there for an hour or so. By that time the clouds will have blown away, and little sunshine will be on her way home. After allowing time for the mob to disperse, you can follow her. Yes, friend, I recommend the float. Don't know whether Byron can swim that far, but you won't be hurt by a little solitude."

"Byron didn't come," O'Rell confessed. "He's still asleep. Mrs. Blish and I are the party."

"I should have thought," said Lorna reflectively, "that you'd seen enough women for one day. However, there's no accounting for tastes."

O'Rell looked up and down the beach. Not very far away was Irene, with three young men. She was coming toward him. He felt that the pleasure of the day would be complete without any further interviews with Irene; so he strolled away, and presently encountered June.

"That's a wonderful bathing suit," he told her. "I hope you don't mind getting it wet."

"Not a bit. But wait a minute—I want to speak to some friends."

She turned aside to a chair a little apart from the others, where an elderly man in a white flannel suit leaned back lazily, watching the beach from half closed eyes—half closed, but keen; O'Rell thought that little escaped them. June talked to the stranger for a moment, then came skipping back to O'Rell.

"Excuse me for not introducing you," she said; "but he's here on business."

O'Rell shivered.

"What is he—a detective? His eyes are pretty sharp!"

"Sharp? They're sharp enough to be worth a few hundred thousand a year. That's Bryant Harrold. You know who Bryant Harrold is—the producer of Sunkist Comedies—the impresario of the bathing girls? Of course! No wonder his eyes are sharp. He offered me a job last year, on the Coast, but Byron wouldn't hear of it. I thought I'd better speak to him, for he's always looking for recruits. Maybe I'll take that job, if he offers it again. I'll show Byron he can't treat me like a—a—"

"Byron's devoted to you," O'Rell assured her. "He'd do anything in the world for you."

"Anything but come home when he says he will," said June sulkily.

"Well, let's forget our sorrows and do a little swimming," O'Rell suggested. "Do you think you can make that float?"

"Make it? I should think I can. Hurry up, or I'll beat you to it!"

As a matter of fact, the float was rather a long way out, for an unpracticed swimmer. O'Rell found his wind getting short before he reached it, and he had to exert himself to keep June from beating him. Once there they lay back, exhausted. Neither of them was ready for the trip back without a long rest; so they sprawled out on the boards, talking little, content to be tilted back and forth by the gentle swell of the bay.

Presently a distant whistle told O'Rell that the train was coming in.

XXVII

A BILLOWING swarm of gayly dressed pleasure seekers poured out of the train at the Mallard station and marched across the narrow strip of meadow to the clubhouse grounds. In the van came a grimly determined group, oddly out of keeping with their brilliant neighbors—Jim Teener and his wife, dressed in the clothing ordinarily saved for dances and funerals, and with them Gabe Gooch, the Wynwood town marshal, his nickel-plated star shining on his blue coat.

"This place cost a lot of money," said Jim, as they entered the clubhouse grounds.

"And got in no honest ways, I expect," his wife added. "Our little girl's in mighty bad company, if these folks that got off the train are a specimen!"

"Don't you mind, Mrs. Teener," said Gabe Gooch. "They're none of 'em bigger than the law. We'll get your little girl back safe and sound."

"And while we're doing it," Irene's aunt observed, "I'll give that actress woman a piece of my mind. I'll teach her to lure the child away into this gay life, I will!"

No great distance behind them came another trio, marching in silence. Dirty Dan said nothing, because there was nothing for him to say. Byron and Al knew their way around here, and his part was to keep still and keep in the background till the time came for action.

Al said nothing, because he was beginning to realize that there were a good many people here whom he didn't want to see—people who, while they had nothing on him that would lead them to call the police, could easily have him put off the clubhouse grounds. He would have to keep out of the way of old friends till he and Dan had found what they wanted. Until then Byron Blish could take the lead.

Byron Blish was also silent, because he was beginning to come back to sanity as his hang-over wore off, and to realize that he had made a fool of himself. On sober second thought June's letter didn't sound so menacing; and he couldn't quite think of O'Rell as a man who would break up a friend's home. The evidence was considerable, but not damning. They had at least the right to have a chance to explain.

Unfortunately, Byron had said so much to Dan and Al—he was still firm in the belief that they were detectives—that they might arrest O'Rell, and even June, on sight. There was this matter of the quilt, too. Maybe O'Rell could explain that; but if he began to explain anything, the whole story would come out. Whoever had title to the quilt, there was no doubt that O'Rell had slugged a policeman, and that Blish had stood by and watched him without yelling for help.

The more Byron thought it over, the more certain it seemed that in this enterprise he and O'Rell were in the same boat. Of necessity, whether he liked it or not, it was both for one and one for both. He and Mark ought to stand together; but how could he stand together with the man who had run off with June?

As they reached the clubhouse, his thoughts were interrupted by the greetings of his friends.

"Well, Byron! Thought you had the pip, or something! June said you were laid up. What? No, she and the chap with her are out in the water. Better tumble into your suit, Byron, and take a dip before the races start."

Blish conferred in an undertone with his companions.

"You hear that? They've gone swimming. I—I hope you fellows won't arrest them on the beach. The club would be all cut up about it. It would get into the papers, and spoil the day, and so on. Better let me find them and bring them to you."

He watched anxiously for the effect of this, for at that moment Byron had taken a heroic resolve. If they let him hunt for June and O'Rell, he would seek out the guilty pair and tell them that the police were on their trail. He would give them a chance to get away, if they wanted it.

Of course, he couldn't help hoping that June would be overcome by his abnegation, and would fall, weeping, into his arms. June's tongue was a little sharp, at times; but Byron missed her.

The two from headquarters seemed to be thinking it over. They had drawn aside, and were talking in undertones. Byron began to be hopeful.

"If he's gone swimming," said Al, "he certainly left the rocks somewhere. No room for 'em in a bathing suit."

"Maybe he and this woman planted them," said Dan.

"But it seems they've still got the quilt. God knows, Dan, nobody would lug a quilt around if it was nothing but a quilt."

"They didn't take the quilt swimmin' with 'em," said Dan. "They must have left it somewhere. Let's ask this fellow."

He came sternly up to Byron.

"Got a check room in this place, where they leave baggage?"

"Yes."

"Well, you let us into it. We don't want to flash our shields just yet, for fear somebody will tip this fellow off. First thing is to get back stolen property."

Byron led them to the baggage room off the club lobby and nodded sociably to the negro boy in charge.

"Hello, George! Nearly missed the fireworks. Say, my wife left a suit case in here, didn't she—she and my friend that was with her?"

"I don't 'member, Mr. Blish—been so many to-day. Reckon you could pick it out?"

"Sure!" said Blish, as Dan nudged him. "Let us in, won't you?"

They passed through the doorway and into the long rows of shelves filled with bags, raincoats, and umbrellas.

"Stand ready to bean the coon if we find it!" Dan whispered in Al's ear. "I'll look after our fat friend here. If we don't make a fuss, we ought to be able to pick a car out of the row out there and make a get-away!"

Al nodded, just as Byron ran forward with a startled exclamation. He had recognized the suit case that had accompanied him through the night's adventures.

"Sure that's it?" said Dan. "All right! Then stand back. We'll see what's in it."

"I'll see what's in it, too," said Blish rather defiantly. "I didn't miss anything at home, but if he's run off with my wife—"

Dan pushed him out of the way and picked up the suit case.

" Sure your wife didn't bring any other baggage?" he said. " Better look over this lot."

Byron moved away uncertainly, his eyes running over the shelves. Dan squatted down over the suit case and tore it open with eager fingers.

" That's it!" Al cried softly. " That's the old quilt!"

He clutched the worn silk of the medallion, tore it open, and ran his hands in and out through the eider down. Then he feverishly felt all about the quilt with hurrying fingers.

" Gone!" he gasped.

" I thought so," said Dan. " He's salted 'em away somewhere. Nothing else to do—we've got to get him! Wait till he comes out of the water."

" You can't grab him on the beach," said Al. " Got to wait till he pulls away from the crowd."

" Never mind!" said Dan. " I'm a good waiter. I waited a long time for these rocks to come in from Russia, and I can wait a couple of hours more. We know he's either got 'em, or can tell us what he's done with 'em; and I guess old Dan will make him tell!"

Blish was coming back from a vain search.

" None of my wife's baggage here," he said. " This must have been all they took. What's in it?"

" See for yourself," said Dan. " Only the quilt."

Byron saw for himself, and straightened up with a rueful smile.

" I'm an ass," he admitted. " My wife has only run off for the day. She'd never beat it, even for a week-end, without six or eight changes of clothes. Darnedest woman to carry baggage that I ever saw! Forget what I said, sergeant. I was crazy!"

" I don't deny it," said Dan; " but we ain't interested in your wife. Now we'll leave this stolen property here till we get this fellow O'Rell. We'll go out to the beach and wait for him and your wife to come out of the water. No, don't worry. We'll just take a couple of those chairs and sit down under shady umbrellas till he turns up. We won't pinch him on the beach, or make a fuss, or do anything that would get into the papers. When our friends get through with their little swim, you can talk to your wife, and we'll keep our eyes on this fellow. If you'll keep your mouth shut, maybe we'll forget what we've got on you."

Byron's dark past was rising up to overshadow him.

" All right!" he said. " We'll go out and wait for them."

XXVIII

Gabe Gooch and the Teeners had marched into the midst of the beach crowd with the assurance of those who have the law behind them. They created sufficient stir to suit anybody.

" Great Scott!" gasped the woman whose chair was beside Lorna's. " If there isn't old Basil J. Blue Law himself!"

" Must be shooting a comic," suggested a man behind her.

Lorna sat up and looked at the newcomers—looked for a moment with the amused astonishment of the crowd; but it wasn't hard to guess who they were. She got up hastily and intercepted them.

" I suppose you're from Wynwood," she said. " I'm Miss Lockwood, Irene's cousin. She's somewhere on the beach."

" Is that scoundrel with her?" Jim Teener demanded.

" She's got a lot of company," said Lorna, " and some of them may be scoundrels; but not that scoundrel. Listen! She came straight to me—"

By the time Lorna had finished telling her story—a story in which all mention of the encounter at the masquerade and the trip to Oceanmere was carefully suppressed—she had convinced them. At least, she had convinced Jim Teener and Gabe Gooch. Mrs. Teener was still skeptical.

" Yes, but show me the child!" she demanded. " I've yet to believe she'd run off and leave such a happy home of her own accord. Won't I give her a lickin' when I get her home again, though? Where is she now?"

Lorna waved down the beach. And there was Irene, strolling slowly toward them—Irene in a purple bathing suit that made her aunt's eyes pop wide open, and brought a startled grunt from both men. She saw them—saw them from a distance; but she didn't hide in shame or try to run away. She walked up to them—strode up to them in triumph, with an elderly man in a white flannel suit beside her.

" Well!" said her aunt. " I thought you'd come to a bad end. You go right indoors and take off that shameless thing.

Put on your clothes, and we'll take you home!"

"You won't take me home," said Irene defiantly. "I've got a job!"

"You got a job waitin' table in the lunch room," said her uncle, "at five dollars a week and your keep. Don't you talk about jobs to me. I'm goin' to get you away from this wild life!"

"Wait a minute," said the man in white. "Let's talk this over. I'm Bryant Harrold, producer of Sunkist Comedies. I've just offered your niece a position in my company."

"What kind of a position?" Mrs. Teener snapped.

"I have invited her," said Bryant Harrold, in the reverential tone he always used in speaking of his own productions, "to join my matchless troupe of America's foremost *comédiennes,* the Sunkist Bathing Girls."

"An actress? Never!"

"I have Miss Laird's signature to a contract," said Harrold.

"It ain't worth the paper it's wrote on," said Jim Teener. "Aside of its bein' signed on Sunday, she won't be eighteen till next month. As her lawful guardian, I refuse my consent!"

"Well," said Irene furiously, "you and Aunt Mame and Gabe Gooch can all refuse your consent, but you won't get me back to Wynwood—not when I've got a contract for a hundred and fifty a week!"

"What?" said Jim Teener, clearing his throat.

"A hundred and fifty a week," said Irene. "That's more than you make, Cousin Lorna, even if you make as much as you say. I told you I'd show you up before I'd been in New York very long, and I didn't even have to see Belasco! Mr. Harrold thinks I have a great deal of talent, and—"

"Did you say a hundred and fifty a week?" Jim Teener asked.

Harrold nodded.

"My dear man, a figure like your niece's is one in a million. No, rarer than that—there are only eleven other figures of equal perfection in the United States—those of the other eleven members of my company. There were twelve, till Dorothy Tremaine took to maple marshmallow sundaes and got fat; and ever since then I've been looking for somebody to fill her place. Your niece has had no experience, so I can offer her only a beggarly hundred and fifty just now; but I expect that before long"—he laughed with paternal joviality—"I'll have to give her real money to keep somebody else from bidding her away from me!"

"Where's that contract?" said Jim Teener. "It ain't lawful without my signature, but if you've got a fountain pen—"

"There!" said Irene triumphantly. "Cousin Lorna, I'm driving back in Mr. Harrold's Rolls-Royce. Maybe Uncle Jim and Aunt Mame and Mr. Gooch will go with us."

"We'll stop off for a little dinner at the Ritz," Harrold suggested amiably.

"And then," Irene went on, "we'll call at that frowzy place where you live, Cousin Lorna, and I'll collect my suit case. If this was a weekday, I'd let you have those clothes, but I can't buy anything else till to-morrow, and I'm taking the midnight train for Los Angeles."

"How about it, Mrs. Teener?" said Lorna. "I suppose you'll be going along as chaperon?"

Irene looked alarmed.

"If Jim could spare me," said Mrs. Teener uncertainly.

"Couldn't do without you just now, Mame; but when Irene's settled, we can fix it so we can go out for a nice long visit."

"I suppose," Irene mused, "I do need some elderly woman for chaperon. Would you like the job, Cousin Lorna?"

Till that moment Lorna had done her best to be charitable. After all, she had seen that sort of thing happen a hundred times before; but this was too much. She turned to Harrold and said sharply:

"I suppose you didn't notice that Irene has a glass eye. That won't take very well, will it?"

"They won't look at my eyes," said Irene.

"And she can't swim," Lorna pursued.

"I don't have to swim. I'm a Sunkist Bathing Girl!"

XXIX

As O'Rell and June swam slowly in from the float, Mark was occupied with ungallant speculation as to how he could get rid of his companion. What passed on the beach was not very clear from the distant float, but Irene's purple bathing suit had been conspicuous even in that variegated crowd. He had seen that purple suit the center of a group some of whose members were in street clothes. He had seen it, finally, disappear into the pavilion. It seemed reasonable to suppose that Irene was on her way—that, consequently, he could soon be on his way.

The sooner the better! He and June had spent perhaps half an hour on the float, and she had talked. What she talked about he didn't know, but he had a vague impression that it was everything. No doubt she had to talk fast at home, to compete with Byron; but O'Rell wasn't used to it.

Somewhere he remembered reading a book which had compared marriage to a raft afloat in the sea of life. If he had been afloat on that raft with June, he would certainly have jumped overboard. Only his reluctance to meet Gabe Gooch in a professional way had kept him with her so long as this.

It seemed to him, reviewing his week-end adventures as he swam slowly toward the shore, that every woman whom he met merely served as a foil to offset the innumerable and incredible excellences of Marjorie. Marjorie was a good sport; Marjorie never talked too much, and, when she talked, she usually said something.

In shore, on the beach and in the club-house, were many charming women. He had met a score of them this afternoon. In the old days he could have had a cheerful afternoon swimming with them, dancing with them, talking to them, with the dashing June always in the background as his partner; but times had changed. A few years ago June would have entranced him; now she made him tired. The cold truth was that a year with Marjorie had spoiled him for everybody else.

Of course, he wasn't sure how Marjorie felt about it. He wasn't sure, even, how she had felt before this awful story about him and Irene had turned Wynwood upside down. He had to find out. He would like to leave this crowd, and this beach, and this talkative girl, and go home to face the music.

To be sure, he didn't have a cent; and though he had accepted June's hospitality at the club, he could hardly borrow money from her to get away from her. He had a wild notion of taking the smallest of the diamonds and trying to borrow some money from the steward of the club on that security; but something told him that if he once began cashing in on that hoard, it would be hard to stop.

Then, as he and June came into shallow water and stood up, he heard her gasp:

"Well, back from the tombs! If there isn't Byron!"

True enough, it was Byron—Byron standing at the water's edge and looking at June and Mark with mingled delight and apprehension.

"I never supposed you'd wake up," said June. "I thought Mr. O'Rell and I would have to rout you out when we came back to-night."

"I knew it," said Byron. "Oh, what a boob I was! It was all that cursed booze. It got me all twisted. Verily it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder!"

"Why all this?" said June. "Since when have you turned so moral?"

"Since I found your note," Byron grunted. "You didn't explain much, June. I thought you'd walked out on me—forever!"

"Why, Byron! You knew Mr. O'Rell was with me."

"Yes, that's just it—I knew Mr. O'Rell was with you. Marky, I always had a hunch that if you ever got started, you'd be a devil among women!"

"Well!" said June. "My word! That's a pretty thing to think about your wife!"

"But, my dear, your explanations were so vague—"

"I'm glad you know how it feels," she told him. "Maybe you'll remember that your explanations are sometimes a trifle vague, too."

This domestic discussion seemed to O'Rell too sacred for an outsider's ears, and he surmised that, once wrangling with each other, they wouldn't need him.

"I've got to be going," he announced abruptly.

"What?" they both cried.

"Yes—I ought to get back to Wynwood at once."

"Now, Marky—"

"Byron, I know I began telling you that yesterday afternoon. Lord, how I wish I'd done it—yesterday afternoon!"

"Well," said Byron mournfully, "if you must, you must; but there are the makings of a merry party here, and you'll miss the races."

"I can't stand it," said O'Rell. "I don't seem to care much for that sort of thing any more. Times have changed. Only, Byron—have you any money?"

He couldn't account for Byron's shamefaced look as he answered:

"Sure—quite a lot. I borrowed from my next-door neighbor after I woke up."

O'Rell couldn't know that Blish, in his first half awakened indignation, had borrowed that money for counsel fees and the hire of detectives to follow a fleeing wife. He knew only that here was money—car fare back home.

"Then lend me five," he asked. "Sorry to run away, Mrs. Blish, but now that Byron's here—"

June shrugged her shoulders. Byron's friends were apt to be queer; and certainly O'Rell hadn't amused her as she had hoped when this excursion began. He was polite enough, but somehow his thoughts always seemed to be elsewhere.

Blish drew him aside for a moment as he handed him the bill.

"Say, Marky, there were a couple of detectives looking for you a while ago," he said. "They seemed to think you'd stolen that quilt, but apparently they didn't know anything about the cop. Golly, they had me scared! I don't see 'em now; but keep your eyes open."

"Don't worry," said O'Rell. "I think I know what they were after, and I have a reason to believe that that's all straightened out."

"Well, good luck go with you, kid!"

They rejoined June, and O'Rell made a few more polite expressions of regret at leaving them.

"Never mind," said Blish cheerily. "He'll come down again before long. Next time, Marky, be sure to bring your wife."

"Your wife!" said June.

O'Rell thought it was time to go. With a wave of his hand he turned toward the bathing pavilion—toward his clothes—toward home. He also turned toward his diamonds and toward an explanation to his wife; but these troubles would come in their own due time. Meanwhile he would trust himself.

Ten minutes later he came out of the clubhouse with the suit case containing the quilt in his hand, five dollars in his pocket, and the diamonds inside his vest, and walked rapidly toward the station. At last he was through—through with friends and enemies and chance acquaintances—through, there was reason to hope, with the police. He would enjoy an hour or two of solitude. Only yesterday afternoon he had been lonely—lonely because nobody seemed to know him; but now his highest ambition was to be left alone for an hour or two, and allowed a chance to rest.

Down the driveway came a new flood of club members and their guests, disembarked from the east-bound train just pulling out of the station. O'Rell stood out of the way to let them pass. He looked curiously at the three men, walking together, who were the last of all. There was something familiar about these strangers—not their personalities, but their type. They looked like detectives.

They stared sharply into his face as they passed him; then, apparently satisfied, they went on. He resumed his progress toward the gateway—and then, from a thick patch of shrubbery beside the drive, two men suddenly emerged and blocked his path.

Al and Dan had been watching O'Rell ever since he left the clubhouse—had watched him, indeed, as he left the water—but not from their beach chairs. They had removed themselves hastily from those chairs soon after Byron left them, owing to the misfortune of encountering a gentleman to whom Al had once sold some advance information about a race—information which had turned out to be somewhat out of accord with the facts. They strolled hastily down the beach till they found some sheltering bushes, and from this cover they saw O'Rell and June talking to Byron.

"Can't jump him right here on the beach," said Al.

"We don't need to," Dan reminded him. "Where this bird goes, the rocks go. He couldn't take 'em in the water, but it's a safe guess he don't leave 'em around loose when he's ashore. We've got to wait—that's all. Ah, he's leavin' 'em! Maybe our friend that was lookin' for his wife is havin' him run out!"

Al shook his head.

"They're shakin' hands," he said. "Anyway, there he goes back into the bathhouse when everybody else is headed for the pool, to watch the races. I guess the bird is going to dress."

Presently they saw O'Rell emerging, fully dressed, and starting toward the clubhouse.

"After the quilt!" said Dan. "Do you suppose there was a false bottom in that suit case?"

"Soon find out," Al grunted. "If he gets out here in the bushes, we've got him!"

"You sound kind of eager," said Dan. "I thought you didn't like rough work."

"I don't like to think about it in advance," said Al; "but I can get into it if I have to. Maybe you never heard how I beaned a Mex cop at Tia Juana. I'd do more than that for these pretty babies!"

Dan swore.

"Another trainload coming in," he said. "Seems as if this place gets more crowded all the time. Let's edge over toward the drive. Ah, here he comes! Sure enough—suit case and all—quilt and all! Now, if only he don't get out of the bushes till this crowd's gone into the clubhouse!"

Slipping along under the trees, covering themselves as much as possible among successive bits of shrubbery, they made their way toward the drive. They were too deeply intent on O'Rell to pay much attention to the crowd of new arrivals, or to the three men who brought up the rear. All that Al and Dan saw was that the crowd was disappearing, that O'Rell was being left alone, that they could catch up with him before he began to cross the open meadow between the gate and the station.

"Remember, Dan," said Al softly, "no gun play unless you have to! A shot would bring a dozen chauffeurs from the cars down by the clubhouse."

"Never you worry," said Dan cheerfully. "Likely this fellow will give up when he looks into the muzzle of a gun. If he don't, we can tap him over the bean without a noise. Hurry, now, and make sure he don't see us."

Neither they nor O'Rell noticed the solitary girl, in a blue serge suit, with a shiny black overnight bag in one hand and a heavy silver mesh hand bag in the other, who had paused for directions from the station agent, and was now approaching the gateway.

Al and Dan stepped out into the road, and O'Rell found himself looking into a gun.

"Hands up!" said Dan.

If O'Rell had had any idea of their identity, he would probably have obeyed; but at first glance he supposed that they were the detectives against whom Blish had warned him, and he had an idea that detectives wouldn't shoot unless he gave them provocation. So he merely stood still and said:

"What do you want?"

Dan, swearing fiercely, didn't shoot.

The girl in blue serge arrived in the gateway and stopped short, startled by what she saw.

"Hands up!" said Dan again. "You know what I want!"

And now O'Rell did know; but he didn't put up his hands. Dropping on one knee to dodge the shot that didn't come, he flung the suit case forward with a flip of the hand. It caught Dan fairly in the chest, and he went down in a heap.

As he did so, Al leaped on O'Rell; but Al, alone, had about as much chance against Mark as he would have had against Jack Dempsey. He was shorter, lighter, weaker, and in poorer condition. Nothing but the thought of that handful of diamonds could have stirred him to attack O'Rell at all; but he would take a long chance for his share of that treasure.

He caught O'Rell's arms and held them as well as he could, yelling frantically:

"Bean him, Dan! Bean him!"

Dirty Dan, struggling out from under the suit case, was in no mood for caution. He was angry—blindly, recklessly angry. He leaped to his feet and aimed at the struggling pair. For a moment he couldn't fire without running the risk of hitting Al, and that moment gave the girl at the gate time to drop her bag and run frantically toward the group.

Dan didn't hear her. He was waiting for the inevitable; and in a moment it came. O'Rell shook Al off and smote him across the face with a backhand blow that knocked him flat on his back in the road. Then, as O'Rell straightened up and prepared to rush Dan, Dan pulled the trigger.

As he pulled it, Marjorie swung from behind him—swung her silver mesh bag, and caught Dan just under the ear. The blow fell with all the force that Marjorie's muscular arm could give it, and it struck with all the momentum of a heavy silver bag loaded with a heavy gold vanity case. The shot went wild, and Dan went down; and before he could get up O'Rell was on him.

Behind them Al picked himself up and ran toward them, empty-handed, and cursing the bad luck that had led him to start out last night without a gun. Marjorie saw him coming, and hurled the bag at his head. He dodged it, and grasped her wrists. She screamed.

Down the driveway came a clatter of running feet, and around the clump of bushes at the curve three men appeared and bore down on them. More feet pounded behind the first arrivals; but they weren't needed. When O'Rell heard Marjorie scream, he drove his fist fiercely into Dan's chin. Then he seized Al, tore him away from Marjorie — and a moment later he looked up into the faces of the three mysterious strangers, who had pulled him off his victim.

" There, now!" said the leader of the trio. " Don't beat him to death. I know he was a little rough with the girl, but let him live. He'll live in jail for quite a few years, if that's any comfort!"

O'Rell turned to Marjorie.

" Are you hurt?"

" No!" she gasped. " And you—are you all right?"

" Yes."

" Then everything's all right, Mark," said Marjorie.

O'Rell, forgetting Irene and his lurid past and everything else, caught her in his arms and kissed her.

It must have been rather a long embrace, for when they finally let each other go they were in a crowd. Besides the three men who had come down the drive—besides Al and Dan, who lay handcuffed by the roadside—there were chauffeurs from the clubhouse, and the station agent, who had run down with an ancient revolver as he saw the struggle, and three or four men in bathing suits—the advance guard of a mob.

" Now all you people clear out!" said the man who had pulled O'Rell off. " I'm Bullen, of the Department of Justice. Here, you—and you, miss—come over to the railroad station, and we'll get this cleared up."

XXX

The procession started across the meadow, Al and Dan limping along under guard, with the station agent and his gun at their heels. Marjorie and O'Rell followed, a little behind them, her hand in his arm.

" What are you doing here?" Mark said; but there was no misunderstanding the tone in which he said it.

" When I read the newspaper this morning," said Marjorie, " I thought you might be in trouble, and I'd better try to find you. Mr. Atlee said you'd gone home with Byron Blish, and I found out where he lived, and then trailed you down here. My hunch was right—you were in trouble!"

He looked down into her eyes.

" I'm not in trouble now; but oh, Marjorie, I don't know whether you'll ever speak to me again!"

" I will," she assured him. " That article in the paper was all nonsense. I knew that as soon as I saw it. Aunt Cordelia is an idiot!"

" The girl's on her way home, I suppose," he said. " I—"

" Never mind explaining," said Marjorie. " Wait till we have time to talk. I know it's all right!"

" You're an angel!"

" I'm not, but I hope I have sense. By the way, where's Mrs. Blish?"

" With her husband," he said, rather surprised. " At least, I left them together."

Marjorie laughed.

" Oh, Mark, you're the first sane person I've talked to since—since you left home!"

He blushed.

" I've got to tell you this," he said honestly, " because maybe it will change your opinion of me. That girl—she kissed me. I—I didn't know she was going to do it, or I'd have tried to stop her."

" Never mind!" said Marjorie, with a smile. " A friend of Howard's tried to kiss me last night. Luckily, I knew he was going to do it—knew it half an hour or so before he did. I stopped him; but oh, Mark, I came near not trying to stop him! I guess we both have some confessions, maybe; but they'll keep."

She squeezed his arm as they walked into the waiting room, whither Bullen had led his prisoners.

" Well!" Bullen snorted. " This is luck! Do you know these birds?"

" Never saw them," said O'Rell.

" I know 'em. The big fellow's Dirty Dan McGarrah. I've been trailing him for two days—lost him twice, but I picked him up at last. Just in time, too! This other fellow — Keeley — I've never run into before; but he's done time. This is a good day's work, all right!"

" What do you want them for?" O'Rell asked. " You didn't know they were going to try to hold me up."

" I want them," said Bullen, " for running diamonds in from Russia to finance the red revolution."

" Yah!" Dan growled from the bench where Bullen had flung him. " I got no diamonds. Where do you get that bunk? You've got nothing on me."

" Maybe you haven't any diamonds now," said Bullen cheerfully; " but we know you had them yesterday. We've had this thing watched from the time the messenger crossed into Finland. That messenger—the man from the Extraordinary Commission—is in jail in Stockholm. The man who gave you the diamonds was one of our own agents. The only reason he didn't arrest you was that he was waiting for your gang."

"A frame-up!" Dan growled. "Besides, you've got nothin' on me. I tell you I got no diamonds."

"If you haven't got 'em now," said Bullen, "I can turn you over to the customs people for smuggling, or to the county sheriff for attempted assault and robbery on our friend here; but I've got a hunch the old Department of Justice will manage to find those diamonds."

"You won't have very far to look for them," said O'Rell, pulling the tied-up handkerchief out of his inside pocket. "There they are."

Bullen opened the handkerchief and poured the diamonds out on the bench.

"There they are," he said. "But who the devil are you, and where the devil did you find them?"

"I found them—" O'Rell paused. It was, perhaps, a trifle hazardous to mention the quilt. "I found them in a suit case in Mother McCurdy's rooming house last night—a suit case that belongs to my wife's aunt. I don't know how these fellows found out that I had them, but, as you see, they did their best to get them back."

"Mother McCurdy's!" said Bullen. "Yes, these two were in there last night—the police told me that. I guess we can tie all this together."

"You can't tie anything on me," said Al defiantly. "I never saw the diamonds. Likely this bird cracked a safe."

O'Rell grinned.

"Figure it out as you please," he said amiably. "I haven't cracked a safe, Mr. Bullen, and I'm inclined to think that these are the diamonds you want; but if you have any trouble in proving it—well, they turned up in my wife's aunt's suit case. I suppose, if findings are keepings, they belong to her. Marjorie, do you think that would mollify Aunt Cordelia?"

Bullen swept them into his pocket.

"I guess we'll tie them up to Dirty Dan all right. Even if we don't, you needn't sit up of nights figuring how you'll spend the money. The real diamonds—the ones that came out of Russia—were confiscated by the Swedish government when they arrested the messenger. These things here are only paste, sent along after we'd fixed it up with the Swedes to try to break up the gang. Maybe they'd look well on your wife, but they wouldn't pay for the lawyer you'd have to hire to get 'em."

"Then the Swedes have the real ones?" Marjorie asked.

"They certainly have."

O'Rell grunted. This seemed unfair.

"What will they do with them?"

"Search me!" said Bullen. "Probably trade them for some safety matches that will light."

Mark and Marjorie went out on the station platform and watched Bullen, his assistants, and his prisoners drive off in a car which the Federal officer had commandeered from the clubhouse.

"Well?" Mark asked. "Now what?"

"Where were you going when you were held up?"

He grinned.

"I was going to find you."

"And I was going to find you."

"Well," he said softly, "we've found each other—always and forever!"

She squeezed his arm.

"I'd like to take you back to Wynwood," she said, "and walk up and down every street with you, arm in arm, and show them; but not this evening. I'm too mad at the town, and the family. What would you like to do?"

"I'll tell you what I'd like to do. School doesn't open till Tuesday. We've to-night, and all day to-morrow, and to-morrow night. There's a train for New York in ten minutes. I'd like to take you in town, go to the best hotel, have dinner, and dance afterward. To-morrow we could play around and go to the theater and dance some more—a holiday in New York; but I don't suppose you'd care for that."

"I'd love it," said Marjorie. "I was thinking last night that maybe Wynwood had got to be a habit with me."

"But I haven't any money," said O'Rell. "That is, only five dollars."

"I have eight hundred," said Marjorie.

"What?" exclaimed O'Rell. "Where did you get it?"

"I borrowed it from the man who tried to kiss me."

"What for?"

"I thought I might have to bail you out."

O'Rell's face brightened with a great inspiration.

" I think," he suggested, " that we need to bail both ourselves out—out of Wynwood—away from home. We can't spend eight hundred dollars in thirty-six hours; times have changed. What we spend we can pay him out of the bank account. Here's the idea—we'll elope on your amorous friend's money. We won't tell your family, or anybody. Let them worry about us till Tuesday. It will do them good!"

" It would be a new honeymoon," said Marjorie; " only I haven't much of a trousseau with me."

He looked at her little black bag, and laughed.

" More than I have. I've lost my hat, and I'm wearing Blish's collar; but who cares? Do you like my idea?"

" I think," said Marjorie, " that it's wild, and reprehensible—and delightful!"

" Here comes our train," he said, picking up the suit case.

Marjorie frowned at it.

" That's a terrible-looking old thing, Mark. No self-respecting bell boy would pick it up. Is there anything in it?"

" The quilt—the Salem quilt."

" Only the Salem quilt? Then leave it here."

" Leave it here? The quilt that I've carried around with me through twenty-four of the most crowded hours of my life—the quilt that very nearly got me murdered—the quilt that is going to be my apology to Aunt Cordelia?"

" Damn Aunt Cordelia!" said Marjorie—Marjorie, who had never sworn before. " She's going to apologize to you. Mark, I made a good resolution this morning. Hereafter we keep the family in its place. You're my family. The Salem quilt's an old rag. We'll leave it here, and if Aunt Cordelia dares to say a word—"

He grinned.

" ' Trust thyself,' " he quoted. " ' Every heart vibrates to that iron string.' "

" Trust ourselves," Marjorie amended, giving the suit case a vicious little kick as the train pulled in.

It was a gallant gesture—a gesture that symbolized Marjorie's change of heart, and her new realization that she loved her husband more than she loved her family.

It was a fortunate gesture, too. Throughout the long prosecution that finally sent Dan and Al to a Federal prison—a trial in which both defendants, fighting to the end, steadfastly refused to take the stand and explain just how they had lost the diamonds they had tried to recover—nothing came out that threw any light on the desperate and mysterious assault on a policeman in front of Mother McCurdy's house, by a man carrying a quilt.

THE END

A SONG OF PARTING

Now that our feet, so loath to leave, have gone
From the dear hills that knew our wayfaring,
I find no hint of glamour in the dawn;
Is there for you, sweet, any lovely thing?

Now that our paths are sundered—sundered far—
When the soft dusk descends on purple wing
I miss the rapture of the vesper star;
Is there for you, sweet, any lovely thing?

Now that no more beneath the arch of noon
We hear together bird and rillet sing,
I catch no melody in time or tune;
Is there for you, sweet, any lovely thing?

Now that all hours hold us so wide apart,
And not one close or comrade guerdon bring,
I feel a poignant loneliness at heart;
Is there for you, sweet, any lovely thing?

Sennett Stephens

Ropes of Sand

SHOWING THAT NEW ENGLAND AND THE ARABIAN DESERT ARE NOT SO IMPOSSIBLY FAR APART

By John D. Swain

"IF you're anything like me," said the little commuter, "you'll get lots of fun hunting curios!"

His companion of the smoking car, a lean, taciturn man in tweeds, fixed him with a look of bored inquiry. Behind his great horn spectacles the little man's eyes lighted with the flame of the collector.

"I mean arrowheads, both quartz and flint, and all sorts of queer things from wrecked ships—broken dirks, maybe, and once in a while a coin. I found an English shilling once, dated 'way back in 1820. After a sou'easter has shifted the sands, I always go out first thing. You don't know how it sort of gets you, until you've tried!"

The lean man grunted. His chance acquaintance sighed ecstatically.

"Tell you what, Mr. Darien — if you make a long stay at Sandwich, run over and see my collection of antiques any Sunday. I'm in Smith's Hole—we're slowing down for it now. Only five miles from Sandwich, and there's a buckboard makes two trips a day. I got some wonderful shells, and a stone that an Amherst professor told me he's pretty sure is a fragment of an Indian pestle, and two fine sharks' teeth. You'd be surprised!"

He assembled his numerous bundles and rose as the train came to a jerky halt.

"Here's where I get off. Real pleased to have met you. Give me a chance, and I'll have you as crazy as I am about poking around and digging over old Indian burying grounds!"

The somber features of the bronzed man slightly relaxed.

"You never can tell," he admitted. "Good-by, and good luck!"

The car had thinned out now. For the first time since leaving the city he had the full seat to himself. He shifted his big kit bag from beneath his feet, and hunched down with his head resting upon the seat back, his eyes closed.

A grin, half pitying, flickered over his rather austere mouth as he thought of the dusty, perspiring, eager little commuter, evidently not too prosperous, toiling at some desk job in the torrid city, buoyed up by the thought of a long Sunday spent grubbing up dubious arrowheads and—on one red-letter day—a century-old shilling!

He wondered what the little man would have said, how he would have looked, had Darien told him of that day when, deep below the obliterating sands, he had crept through a narrow stone doorway and stood in a little chamber whose walls, brilliant with blue and vermilion frescoes, inclosed the slender sarcophagus of a princess whose embalmed slumber had been disturbed by no footfall for more than five thousand years!

Or that other time, when—but what was the use? The pathetically cheerful little man might have considered him a whopping liar—or he might have believed, and never thereafter had any pleasure from his own puny explorations.

Darien was glad that he had, as usual, played the part of listener. His life work had not encouraged garrulity. Something of the austerity of the desert had crept into his blood with each added year—a brooding sense of vanished empires, brilliant, ruthless, incredibly luxurious, erased so completely that only by enormous patience and the expenditure of vast sums can the archæologist of a cheaper, more sophisticated civilization gather here and there the rare fragments which, in the end, serve only to belittle himself and his era!

It was Darien, you may recall, whose discovery of one-half of an enormous brick impressed with a long record written in characters standing between ideographic and phonetic, proved beyond doubt that the Emperor Shadra-tilser died in the year 6308 B.C., and not, as had been supposed, in 6210. This alone made him famous, but in a somewhat limited circle. The public at large knew him much better because a London illustrated magazine made a feature of his capture by the Ben Oola tribe, his stoical endurance of unbelievable tortures, his surprising willingness to embrace Islamism in order to secure immunity for his researches, and a hinted romance with the youngest daughter of a mighty sheik who looked like a prophet and smelled like a goatherd.

And now for the first time in fifteen years he was returning to his native country, as much an alien as one of his Mohammedan camel drivers. He hadn't a living relative, so far as he knew. He belonged to a score of learned societies, but had never set foot on a golf course. He had never enjoyed a cabaret, though in Port Said he had often enough seen much worse. He could swear fluently in Arabic, but his halting English was broidered with idioms that Americans of his age—thirty-eight—had forgotten.

The last modern novel he had read was something of Ouida's. He was childishly curious concerning radiophones and player pianos and self-starting automobiles; but he had picked up from wandering dervishes some odd things that he could do nearly as well as they—mere conjurers' tricks, partly, yet they had an uncanny side that he could not explain.

On the impulse of the moment he had decided upon a vacation. Something—a trifle in itself—had frightened him into the sudden realization that he was on the point of sinking irretrievably into the remorseless bondage of the East, with its strange blend of languor and austerity.

His departure had been almost a flight. He had left young Tilson in charge—faithful chap, just over from Johns Hopkins. They had been on the point of something pretty big—a cuneiform library practically intact—but he had not even waited for the final two or three days of shoveling. He had outfitted at an English tailor's in Alexandria, and had come direct to New York on a slow liner.

Now — thus spake the trainman — the next stop was Sandwich, the end of the line, and Darien's destination.

A change, a rest — that was what he wanted. None of your violent antitheses—roof gardens, a lot of—what was the droll name? — *flappers!* No big hotels with noted chefs, orchestras, running ice water in every room, and a jigamarig by which each guest selected his favorite temperature. Plain people—his own sort, not too learned, but certainly not too frivolous. Home life—that embraced the whole idea.

Tom Williams—good old Tom, who had been an upper-class man in Yale when he was a freshy, and had showed him his way about, at first merely because they happened to be the only two men up from St. Stephen's prep, but later because they had developed a sincere liking for each other—Tom was to be his host.

How well he remembered his visits to his friend's home in vacation time! Grace said before each meal; family prayers before retiring; church, morning and evening on Sunday, and on Thursday night; sedate, well-considered discourse; "improving" books; obvious bric-a-brac.

The Williamses came from Puritan stock, and for generations had manufactured shoe findings — whatever they were—in Lynn. Well, findings had evidently been keepings, for the family fortune had steadily grown. Young Tom had an allowance unusual for his day in Yale, and spent most of it on uniform sets of the accepted, safe authors.

Tom wasn't a prig, though his seriousness was carried to surprising lengths. He drank beer and smoked a pipe; but to little groups of the more frivolous undergrads he gave talks upon the danger of consorting with the wasp-waisted, melon-sleeved vampires of that era. He illustrated his warnings by means of an expensive life-sized chart, which he unrolled and demonstrated upon with a long wand. It had been a huge joke, Darien remembered, but because Tom was pure gold at heart, and played guard on one of Eli's classic football machines, and cheerfully loaned money he never expected to get back, he was one of the popular men of his day.

The thought of spending an indeterminate time under this old friend's roof was a little terrifying, and yet somehow alluring. It would entail many things for which Darien cared nothing, personally, but which would evoke memories of youth. Above all, it would be intensely unlike his long years spent grubbing in the blistering sands, and fighting for his life against fanatic tribesmen, exotic diseases, pitiless thirst, and loneliness.

It had been the merest trifle that had turned Darien's thoughts towards archæology. A mummy case, seen one rainy day in the old Peabody Museum—the form of an Egyptian princess, a memory in myrrh and aloes, as perfect as on the day she had died while slaves were sweating up the first tiers of the Pyramid of Cheops. He had taken a postgraduate course at the University of Pennsylvania, and then had gone out to Syria with an expedition.

It had never been the scientific side that had stirred him most. There were men in the university who had never been as far east as New Jersey who knew far more than he, and could read inscriptions meaningless to him. Of course, he had gathered a mass of curious lore—one couldn't avoid that; but what gripped him was the zest of the hunt, the conjecture, often foiled, again unexpectedly rewarded by the discovery of the exquisite jeweled necklace of a king's favorite, of the rude weapons of vanished legions, of a tradesman's shop embalmed in the dry aseptic sands for scores of centuries.

He smiled as the thought crossed his mind that he was, after all, such another as the little commuter, only on a vaster scale —a hunter of potsherds and arrowheads, a child pleased to find a pretty shell on the sands at low tide.

The train came to a staggering halt. Glancing out, Darien beheld the usual scene at any beach station—waiting flivvers, buckboards, men and women in sport clothes, wardrobe trunks stacked up for the return trip, chow dogs on leashes, silly, anticipatory grins on faces waiting to greet arriving guests.

Tom was to meet the expected guest—so he had said when Darien telephoned out from the city. He had married before his friend went to the East. Darien remembered sending him some atrocity in cut glass; but he had never met Tom's wife, nor, of course, his two girls.

He swung up his heavy kit bag and descended to the platform, trying to identify his old friend of twenty years ago among the waiting crowd.

II

It was not Tom—the Tom of *vingt ans après* with a little more flesh and considerably less hair—who met him, but a young girl in the array of the flapper of to-morrow who, with both hands extended and a smile of welcome on her face, stepped out from a group of short-skirted, dimple-kneed maidens looking on with a cool assurance that belied their years.

There was a touch of autumn in the air, sufficient excuse for the long-paneled skirt which Paris had decreed for October. Beneath a smart tricorn hat her blue eyes danced merrily, although her short upper lip was pulled down in pretended awe.

" This is Dr. Darien, F.R.G.S., LL.D.—"

" And P.P.C.," he interrupted, dropping his kit bag and enfolding her firm little hands in his muscular fingers. " Paying a final visit to the scenes of his childhood before the sands of the desert engulf him forever. You're Tom's little girl, of course?"

She nodded, leading the way to a rakish-looking sport car with seats all of six inches high and enormous tires.

" Gladys, kind sir — eighteen, going on nineteen, and bringing her father's gray hairs in sorrow to involuntary bankruptcy!"

She showed Darien where to stow his bag, and he seated himself gingerly, his knees on a level with his chin. Her hands swung the great brass and maple wheel, and they spun around and rolled easily down the driveway and over the broad macadam leading to the beach.

The speed, to one accustomed to the rolling gait of camels and the patient, trudging pace of donkeys, seemed giddy. They passed — were seldom passed by — other cars, whose occupants waved greetings. Half a mile from the station Gladys turned into a side road where the white sand slowed them down, and a cool, salt breath met them from the rolling moors, crimson and purple with samphire and marsh rosemary. In the distance winked the open sea, incredibly blue.

Here the houses were set far apart—great, rambling edifices of every style from the Swiss chalet to the Spanish mission, each surrounded by rolling acres upon which, with incredible patience and at incredible cost, poplars and clipped hedges and velvety lawns had been browbeaten from the harsh, sterile soil. The native trees were curiously twisted and stunted, winning a few inches a year against the odds of gale and shifting dunes. Up the slopes marched little armies of dwarf cedars, black and straight.

Gladys, driving by instinct, surveyed her fare with frankly admiring eyes.

"You're ever so much younger than I expected," she decided. "We'd thought of you, of course, as a contemporary of dad's; and then somehow I expected that an archæologist would have a long, inquisitive nose, and double lenses, and all that, if you get the idea!"

Darien laughed.

"I'm about four years younger than Tom, if I remember; and I've been preserved by the dry air of the desert, I dare say—like the mummies."

"Well, I'm glad I saw you first! Came within an ace of playing golf instead, and letting Dot fetch you; and Dot is an awful petter!" Gladys chuckled. "It's simply great to have you for a guest! I've been wondering what on earth we could do to console you for the Egyptian sarcophaguses and Chaldean monoliths and everything, but—"

She left her sentence unfinished, and Darien could think of nothing whatever to rejoin. His pulses were still throbbing when she pointed out a great house like a castle, with terraces against which the tide washed.

"That's Stonewall," she explained. "Copied from an old Welsh castle which, dad claims, was once infested by the ancestral Williamses. We have everything but a drawbridge and a portcullis—sconces on the walls, rushes on the refectory floor, embrasures, and our coat of arms everywhere. Even the cellar is exactly like a dungeon, only with a complicated furnace in place of rack and wheel."

Darien felt that he must get things a bit clearer before they arrived, for it was plain that his views needed to be revised. He had not dreamed that old Tom had arrived at such luxury.

"I say—please—if we could stop just a minute or two—" he begged.

The girl appraised him with amused eyes. She guided the car to the right, and came to a smooth halt beneath a crooked wild apple tree.

"Yes?" she encouraged, leaning ever so slightly toward him.

"What I want," said Darien, "is to get myself readjusted. You see, the Tom I carry around in my mind is a sober sort of chap, not too prosperous, liking the simple life. I expected that he'd meet me driving a carryall, and in his shirt sleeves—"

"And, instead, you are met by a most frivolous collegiate—we don't talk of 'flappers' any more—and she carries you off to an impossible Welsh keep!" She snuggled down pliantly on her seat. "I think I understand. Suspected dad was like that, once upon a time, from little things he lets fall when he has a hang-over!"

"A—beg pardon?"

"Remorse, you know, after a rough night. Harks back to the dear old days when he hit nothing stronger than lemon squashes, and occupied the family pew every Sunday morning. You probably know more about that phase than we do. Along came prosperity, and syncopated music, and nature dancing—the new generation. Finally Mr. Volstead spilled the beans by telling us we mustn't drink, and a lot of us who had never cared about it began to do it just because it was *verboten*. An army of censors descended upon the land, and peered through keyholes and thumbed books; and about this time all who had the price began stocking cellars and buying unexpurgated editions and their own projecting apparatus to run off censored films!" She paused, and studied Darien's troubled eyes. "It's a gesture—if you understand me—against all sorts of anti-this-and-that societies; the old Anglo-Saxon refusal to be told what one mustn't read and wear and do."

She touched the starter, and the car moved on.

"It should be tremendously entertaining to you," continued Gladys. "Such a change, not merely from those dear oases and prehistoric temples, but from the America you left behind! But there's one thing—you don't have to follow us. We've had all sorts of guests—a bishop, a pugilist, a swami, and a college president all at one time; meat eaters and vegetarians, stud poker hounds and cubist painters. Dad is frantically glad you're coming, but you can live your own life."

III

DURING the remaining ten minutes they chatted of inconsequential things. Darien had recovered his serenity when they drew up before the yawning entrance, from which a couple of nimble footmen darted, one to take his kit bag, the other to run the car around to the garage somewhere in the rear.

The portals discharged Tom like a missile; and in his mighty embrace Darien felt a curious relief that he had, seemingly, altered but little physically. Certainly there was nothing flabby or decadent about the burly figure in knickerbockers, and a country club tan hid the network of little purple veins about nose and jowl. His bristling hair was nearly white, but there was plenty of it.

He was still pounding Darien on the back with great, hard fists, and calling him "Jimmy," when Mrs. Williams appeared. Save that she was very sure of herself and very correctly turned out, and looked like an elder sister of Gladys, the visitor gained no very definite impression at the moment. She gave him a cool, smooth hand, and included Tom in her indulgent smile.

"I ought to detest you, Mr. Darien—no, Jimmy!" she said. "You have been dinned into my ears for weeks. I know all about your past. Now you silly boys must have it out, and play to your hearts' content. You may give the college yell, if you like!"

"I almost did," confessed the guest. "You can't even imagine what it means to me, buried alive all these years, to be allowed to revisit the world!"

They stood for a few moments in the incredibly big, bare hall, against whose walls gloomed arms and trophies; then Tom himself escorted Darien to his room. While a Japanese, assigned to act as the guest's valet, unpacked his huge bag, the old friends fired questions at each other, rarely troubling to reply to them.

The insistent hiss of water broke in on them.

"Yamata will hang around until you bathe," Tom said. "Might as well humor him and get rid of him. Come right down when you are dressed. Wear anything—don't have to be conventional with me! Dinner's in half an hour."

From a bathroom equipped with a battery of sprays, needles, and showers, and with a translucent green glass tub, Darien emerged to put on the dinner suit, with soft, pleated shirt and rolling collar, which Yamata had spread on the bed. Even socks and handkerchief had been selected for him, and the links inserted in his cuffs. Tom might not care, but it was plain that the Jap had settled the little matter of dress for the guest.

Dinner — an intricate affair — was *en famille*. Darien met Dorothy, whom Gladys had characterized as a "petter." Two years younger than her sister, she was a little brunette given to polo and seaplanes. He easily divined that Dot, if her fancy were engaged, would go much further than the obvious Gladys, and would do so with malice aforethought.

Some people were dropping in after dinner, Tom announced — casual neighbors. Darien needn't bother with them unless he chose. There would be house guests for the week-end, of course — Major Dimick, who did wonderful espionage work during the war; Seddon, who wrote some new sort of poetry that was mostly vocatives strung together with suspense periods; and two or three women.

Meanwhile, course was replaced by course, a surprising amount of wine was served, and the talk was desultory. Darien was glad that nobody asked him foolish questions about the Arabs, or the life he had run away from.

Tom drank a good deal, he noticed, but scarcely more than the girls did. There were cocktails, followed by sherry, after which champagne was served throughout the meal, and cordials—several sorts—with the coffee. Darien broke a rule in drinking a single cocktail and a glass of champagne on this welcome-home occasion.

The evening seemed interminable to him. At least a dozen people dropped in. There was a table of bridge, some billiards, more dancing. A light snack, which was really a hearty meal in itself, was wheeled in at one stage, and trays of drinks came every little while. Everywhere one turned were big tin boxes of imported cigarettes and cedar humidors of exotic cigars. The women smoked constantly. Little parties broke up, merged, reformed. Couples strayed out to watch the surf pound against the terrace walls and explode into fountains of moonshot spray.

When the butler—an enormous Chinaman—paused, pad and crayon in hand, before Darien, and suavely requested his order for breakfast, he thought for an instant that morning had arrived; but it was only half past one. In deference to a guest, possibly fatigued from his journey, they were breaking up early.

Half an hour later he lay, sleepless, in a great bed with pineapple posters, and heard the herons complain on the marshes that stretched endlessly on one side of his turret chamber. It seemed to him that he had barely dozed away when a soft knock at his door announced Yamata, bearing a tray with his breakfast. A clock, absurdly imitative of an hourglass, announced that it was nine.

IV

"DON'T see how you could bring yourself to go over to Mohammedanism," Tom grumbled, pursuing a train of thought rather than any conversational lead.

They were lounging on the piazza of the country club, whither they had gone because there never seemed to be a chance for uninterrupted talk at Stonewall.

"Go over?" repeated Darien, vaguely puzzled. "I thought you knew that I was never connected with any Christian sect. Didn't go in for religion as strongly as you used to."

The big man reddened under his tan.

"Oh, I know that I haven't set foot in a church since last Easter—that I'm a backslider, and all that. I don't suppose there's any of the stuff of saints or martyrs in me; but it would take a lot of doing to make me into a heathen!"

"So far as heathenism goes, is it possible you do not know that Islam's worship of God is about as crystal clear and free from idolatry as can be found anywhere?"

Tom pulled sullenly at his pipe.

"Of course I know they don't bow down to idols. I believe they won't even tolerate a statue or picture of anything in the heavens above or the earth beneath, and all that; but you had to swallow a lot of bunk about Mohammed and the Koran!"

"Not at all," protested Darien. "There are as many bibles as cook books, and all of them have merit. The Koran is one of the best; but I have always felt that each man worships his own god. No two conceive a tree, or a color, or an odor in identical terms; how much less a mystical, intangible deity! Why, in any church where the congregation numbers two hundred, two hundred gods are being worshiped—or perhaps two hundred and one!"

Not often was there talk of so grave a nature. Guests came and went in shoals, to be swallowed up by the great house, the number of whose rooms Darien could only guess. Few were presented formally. One scraped acquaintance, and congenial cliques formed, only to be broken by departures and fresh arrivals.

It was a superficial tide, roughly divided into three groups—celebrities of any sort whom Mrs. Williams could net, apparently for the pleasure of adding their signatures to her famous guest book; the flappers and cake eaters, who were more especially asked for the sake of the two girls; and a dubious smattering of sporting men attracted by Tom's cellar, and to a lesser degree by the golf and fishing.

Among them Darien found here and there a companionable soul. Major Dimick loved a quiet game of chess. A young professor of philology was genuinely interested in the recent excavations in Mesopotamia and along the upper Nile; but in general he seemed to move in a brilliant atmosphere of superficiality, surrounded by men and women who regarded ten years back as ancient history. The books they read, the pictures they knew, meant nothing to him. Their very talk, glittering with an evanescent idiom which became obsolescent overnight, was foreign to his ears. Above all, there seemed to be a tireless pursuit of the trivial—an intricate game whose prize was a gilded bladder.

Wonderfully fit, hard and lean and capable of extraordinary feats of endurance, Darien never clambered into bed without feeling utterly wearied. He marveled at the vitality of these others, flabby, neurotic, but able to keep up this sort of thing night after night, often until the eastern sky paled with dawn. From their comments he judged that their winter was even more strenuous—a period of really ferocious forays after pleasure.

Of course, he thought, this was their game; they were hardened to it. Possibly the surprising amount of alcohol they consumed had something to do with it. Darien, after his initial toast, had returned to the strict sobriety in which he was one with his adopted faith.

Not all were frivolous, of course. A few of the guests were serious people; but most of them were chiefly concerned with the stock market, or with politics. These were more alien to Darien than the lotus eaters. Then there were the athletic youngsters who made of sport a religion, and who did with racket and mashie feats as remarkable, in their way, as the tricks of conjurers. None of the artists, poets, or playwrights seemed serious. They worked—if at all—with their tongues in their cheeks, and when asked as to their theories of balance and meter they took prompt refuge in a glib terminology.

More and more the august silences of the desert called to him. He was homesick for the mighty reaches of sand that hold in their breast, layer upon layer, the bones of vanished civilizations, and upon whose surface move the slow caravans, piloted by men who dress and speak and live as their forbears did in the days before the stories of the Old Testament had crystallized into written words.

Yet, when he spoke of going, a great clamor of protest anchored him. In some indefinable way, Tom seemed to derive comfort from his presence, and to cling to him as a landmark of some country which he had loved, but lost. Often, after the guests had separated for the night, he would appear at Darien's door, a great bearish figure in a loose bath robe, with a bottle of bland old Scotch clutched in one hand, his pipe in the other; and they would talk for a couple of hours while the house slept.

These were almost the only unbroken sessions they ever had—more precious to Darien than all the rest of the hectic days. They moved again across the old campus, threshed out the chances of vanished nines and elevens, and refurnished, from memory, the old room in East Middle, until every print, photograph, trophy, chair, and book was in its proper place. One night they argued excitedly for half an hour over the question whether a certain pipe rack used to hang at the right or the left of their fireplace.

With Dot the guest got on famously from the first. None of the family would play the rôle of passenger in her seaplane; but he showed no trace of nerves on that first day when she took him up and tried all her stunts.

"I wonder if it is courage," she asked him, when, after a long flight, they settled like a waterfowl upon the sea; "or if it's just that kismet stuff?"

"I'm sure it's not courage," he had told her. "As far as I can tell, it is indifference. A sense of humor, it may be—the feeling that it is ridiculous to suppose that it really matters what happens to an atom like me."

"Is it something that grew on you out there in the desert?"

He nodded, offered her a cigarette, and selected one for himself.

"I stood one day beneath a great broken lion, upon whose pedestal a half obliterated inscription recounted that some king, thousands of years ago, had wiped out an entire city, leveling its palaces, temples, and hovels, and sowing its site with salt. The number of captives was enumerated by rank—nobles, priests, warriors, merchants; the weight of the gold and silver and jewels, the tally of flocks and herds. The people who vaingloriously set up this mighty lion had also passed away, so completely that we know nothing of their culture, or religion, or laws, or appearance, or manner of life, save what we can glean from a few broken sentences and one or two mutilated monuments."

They were drifting toward the distant shore on a making tide, Dot with one hand on the tiller to shape her course for the Stonewall wharf. It was very still, save for the querulous voices of wheeling gulls and the faint slapping of little waves against the seaplane's counter.

"In scraping away the sand at the base of the monolith, where it had encroached upon the lettering," Darien continued, "I disturbed a nest of ants. There ensued a tremendous activity in the small city—a community as highly organized, in its way, as one of ours. You know they have their tiny herds of plant lice, which they milk for a sweet, colorless fluid. There are nurseries and granaries, and a highly developed division of labor.

"Well, out rushed their soldiers, as orderly as one of our crack infantry regiments. I paused to watch them, forgetting for the moment all about that older city beneath whose ruins they had tunneled. There came a flash of vivid green, and a big lizard darted out of a crack in the lion rock, and instantly began to devour the ants. Then there followed, in miniature, a replica of what must have happened in that place, centuries ago, to the city of men and women. More soldiers rushed out, brave but futile; laborers; nurses bearing grubs in their mandibles. The lizard devoured them all, as fast as they appeared; and presently there were no more. And then it came to me that in the inscrutable design of destiny the destruction of this ant city was probably on a par with the human calamity with which I had concerned myself; that it was rash to presume that the one was either more or less significant than the other.

"Never since then have I been able to feel that my life or happiness is of any special importance in the infinite scheme. Archimedes must have felt that way, and Diogenes, in his tub. I've heard that astronomers whose telescopes penetrate a little way into space, who gaze long upon the dead valleys of the moon, and who think in terms of millions of years, grow indifferent to their own wants, and lose all sense of fear, egotism, hatred, emotion of any sort. Our assumption of superiority, our condescension toward the beasts, the notion that we are lords of creation, is nothing more than a sort of whistling to keep up our courage as we thread the darkness of eternity."

Dot threw over her helm to swing the seaplane into port.

"Still," she smiled, "you are not wholly indifferent. You are pretty regular, for instance, about your prayers."

It was true. Three times a day, like all true Moslems, Darien knelt for a brief moment of devotion. Usually he managed to retire to his room; but he had not hesitated to bow toward the east when noon or sunset found him in the company of others.

"For two perfectly good reasons," he explained. "As a matter of prudence, I like to retain the habit. Otherwise, when I go back to my Arab friends, I shall forget some day, and they will suspect that I am not a true convert. They might do something very unpleasant about it. A less selfish reason leads me to feel that it is good for a man to forget himself for a few minutes each day. I seldom really pray, but I try to lift my mind above the trivial."

With Gladys, Darien had no serious conversations. In looking over his photographs, she had noted several of a little Arab girl, and had easily guessed her to be the one with whom rumor had coupled the guest's name.

"So this is the girl that I read of—Life of the Harem, didn't they call her?"

Gladys held up an enlargement of a photograph of a slender girl, swathed in white, and mounted on a camel with gay trappings.

"That is Zenobie," he conceded, unsmiling. "Of course, she isn't pure Arab. Her mother was half French, and she herself was in a convent school at Tunis for a while. Hence her Gallicized name; but she is lineally descended from the militant lady who ruled Palmyra."

"Did she cry her pretty eyes out when you left?"

Darien grinned.

"Not before me, at least; nor before old Ben Oola, either. Still, she was quite excited—for an Arab—over my long journey, and made me point out to her on the map just where Sandwich is. I wish I could pronounce it as she did. She managed to make it sound like some town out of the 'Arabian Nights.'"

Not often did any one talk about Darien's life work, or ask questions. At first, he attributed this to design, a feeling on their part that he was on vacation, fed up with the subject and needing complete rest. Gradually he came to see that they had no real interest in it; no curiosity as to the strange folk who have survived unchanged in the arid places of the earth, inflexible, self-sufficient, unassimilable, a compound of deep lore and childish credulity.

The minds of the people at Stonewall were eager, questing, but scampering in narrow circles. They talked of the latest sex novel, written in polyphonic prose; the seeded draw of an invitation tennis tourney to be held at the country club; the disconcerting lengthening of skirts; the inflated profits of the bootleggers; a new chef, and a roadster with platinum trimmings.

Darien was bored, and knew not why he stayed on. He longed for the leagues of shimmering sands, the peace of vanished cities, a repast of fresh dates munched slowly in the shade of a marabout's tomb.

Indian summer had come, and with it a big week-end party, when Mrs. Williams requested him to help her out with something in the way of entertainment. She vaguely suggested Oriental magic; a lecture, perhaps, illustrated with his own lantern slides; Arab songs—if he sang. In the end it was settled that he should don burnoose and turban and attempt a few of the conjuring tricks he had picked up from the dervishes. It would be less ponderous than a stodgy anthropological harangue, and his hostess brightened at the solution.

In the seclusion of his room, Darien limbered up his fingers and tried to recall how one did the mango trick, and that nonsense with a disappearing rope. There were one or two much more startling illusions that he did not care to attempt—things that always gave him the creeps, because he didn't understand the curious results any more than the spectators would—little, faltering steps that he had taken into the mysterious arcana of the secretive East.

V

It had occurred to Gladys, who had a nice sense of the dramatic, that it would heighten the effect were Darien to appear before dinner.

"Do your stuff before they have all seen you sitting pretty at table," she advised. "Dinner is not until eight, and it will be dark enough by seven."

Darien had planned to have the sole illumination come from a shallow pan of denatured alcohol, whose flickering blue flames lend themselves to a proper air of enchantment. But the hunter's moon shone that night from a cloudless sky, and it was decided that the glass doors of the ballroom should be thrown open, and that he should be seated in the river of light which streamed through them. With all the windows shaded, and the guests seated in shadow, the stage would be effectively set.

Stimulated by the girl's coöperation, he felt his distaste for the hocus-pocus diminish. She was a gloriously fresh, healthy child, untouched, as yet, by her heavy drafts on the future, her regular cocktails and irregular sleep, her astonishing consumption of cigarettes. Darien noticed that she did not smoke the slender, gold-tipped, scented sort that in his day the few daring women had affected. She and Tom favored a robust Bulgarian tobacco.

"I'll make you up," Gladys told him. "You look too brown and healthy for a mystic. I must give you a haggard, prayerful visage!"

She wrought a startling effect with her cosmetics and powders. When she finished, he looked upon his mirrored features with surprise. His eyes, deep sunken in a pallid and almost ghastly face with drawn lines and hollowed cheeks, were those of some fasting prophet; and as a final touch she had blackened the lashes and brushed the irises with belladonna, so that they gleamed with a fanatical brilliance.

She clapped her hands when he slipped a burnoose over his dinner clothes and wound a green turban about his head.

"I've made the pilgrimage to Mecca, so I've a right to wear it," he said.

A servant carried down his simple apparatus—a little prayer rug, a couple of flowerpots, one empty and the other half filled with loam, a clothesline. Whatever else he needed he bore in his flowing sleeves.

It was just seven o'clock when Gladys, her eyes sparkling, entered the ballroom and surveyed the chattering guests. She made her little speech:

"By good fortune we have with us tonight one who has lived for twenty years in the mysterious East, absorbing its life, thinking its thoughts, learning its secrets. He has entered the dread fourth dimension and explored the subliminal. He can cast spells, control the esoteric forces of nature, and bring the dead back to life. I ask you all to keep perfect silence while Dr. James Darien, with most of the alphabet after his name, leads you upon a little journey into the realms of the unknown."

Very well done, Darien, waiting behind the portières, smilingly told himself; but she *had* rather put it up to him—and, after all, what had he to show this sophisticated crowd, who were forever having famous conjurers and Indian magicians perform before them for a consideration? The best he could hope for was that the resources of Tom's kitchen—and more especially of his cellar—during the ensuing dinner might leave their minds a bit hazy as to just what he had produced!

Perhaps he did not quite realize how cleverly Gladys had set the stage. When, at her signal, a hidden footman parted the hangings, and Darien stepped forth into the moonlight, a little gasp of surprise swept the dim borders of the room. His eyes seemed to glow with an unearthly fire, and his white, inert face and the odd simplicity of his attire more than justified the girl's florid introduction.

He paused, bowed solemnly thrice, then sank, Arab fashion, to his heels upon the prayer rug. On one side—another of Gladys's ideas — a censer curled its blue smoke sleepily through the moonbeams. On the other stood the flowerpots and the coiled rope.

Darien thrust his hands into the wide sleeves of his burnoose, to hide their nervousness; but his face, stiff beneath the heavy layer of cold cream and powder cunningly applied to it, revealed nothing of the uneasiness he felt. His eyes were fixed steadfastly, as if in the entering moonbeams they beheld things invisible to others.

The final touch was given by a record he had brought from the desert, which Gladys now started on a repeater, with a soft needle. It reproduced the wild falsetto of a reed accompanied by sullen drums. There were only five or six minor notes, reiterated in a curious, pulse-stirring rhythm, and the distant, irregular drums—***tump-tump, tumpy-tump,*** over and over again.

The record was worn and a little scratchy

—a fact which curiously enhanced the weird effect; for it sounded like nothing in the world so much as the ceaseless sifting of the sands, like myriads of little tongues licking at the portals of dead cities.

Two minutes may have elapsed, and Darien was about to force his reluctant hands to attempt something—anything—some little feat of prestidigitation, to justify his being there at all.

Willy Trent, the jester of the house party, had maintained silence as long as he could. He always felt that evening ruined wherein he permitted three consecutive minutes to elapse without pulling some clever line. In common with the rest, he had yielded to the eerie atmosphere; but now that nothing was happening, save that this bird in the outsize nightgown was squatting in the moonshine beside ten cents' worth of incense, he opened his mouth to make a funny crack about it, and get—not into the moonlight, but, as one might say, into the limelight.

Even as Trent opened his weakly humorous lips, something did happen—something so bizarre, so unexpected, that his mouth remained open, but voiceless, while his eyes, with those of every one else in that still room, turned to where, through the wide-flung glass doors, *something floated in.*

It was a slender, lithe figure in white, seeming at first to swim in the green-gold flood; but as it advanced, tiny bare feet thrust into jeweled sandals could be both seen and heard, as silver anklets set with translucent shells tinkled sleepily.

From folds of filmy gauze, bare arms as shapely as those of a Tanagra figurine moved in unison with the throbbing drums. Silver armlets winked green and red as the facets of their jewels caught the light. Great amber eyes above a long veil fixed themselves steadily upon those of Darien. Swaying ever so slightly, bending, but always advancing by infinite littles along the moon river, the girl—or was it a ghost?—came at last so close that the blue incense took her into its odorous embrace.

None had stirred, or breathed audibly. Darien himself seemed alive only in his eyes. It was clever—every one admitted that much after the first amazement had passed; but who was she? That golden body, seeming translucent in the golden light, that slenderness which was so strange a blend of soft youth and ripe perfection—vainly they tried to recall any one known to them who could have been transformed to such exotic loveliness!

And now, at last, Darien moved. He rose very slowly—not as a white man rises, pushing himself up with one hand, but like an Easterner, sinuous, flexible, coming up without effort. He stood erect, then leaned close, to bring his burning eyes upon a level with hers; but he did not venture to touch her. And she, moving still in time to the faint music of reed and drums, began to float back through the moonbeams, to the glass doors, and—followed by Darien—out into the topaz and ebony night.

Some little time—perhaps a minute, perhaps more—elapsed before Gladys ran over to the switch and turned on the lights. Instantly a babel of comment arose.

"Wasn't it *unearthly?*"

"Did you ever see anything so *lovely?*"

"He had me all shivery for a moment!"

"Yes, I fell for it too!"

Every one talking, nobody listening. Then, as Darien did not return for his curtain call, Gladys went out into the garden to find him. By and by she was followed by all the rest; but nobody found him—nor, of course, the spirit he had evoked.

Next morning the gardener found his burnoose and turban near the cliff path; but not one of those who had beheld him work his magic ever set eyes upon James Darien again.

VI

It is not to be denied that this would be an excellent place to stop; and if this were a mystery story, it would almost certainly end right here and now. But so far from being the end of a story, this is really the beginning of one; as was made clear when, about noon, a special delivery letter was received by Mrs. Williams, in which, after such apologies as he could offer for his unceremonious departure, the writer begged that his kit bag might be packed and forwarded to him in New York.

He went on to say:

> If I succeeded in mystifying any of you last night, please believe that none could possibly experience the astonishment and even terror which gripped me when Zenobie appeared. I was just about to show you some silly trick with a flowerpot—the usual bunk—when she drifted in; and for a full minute I don't believe I breathed. Even when I rose and followed her out, I wasn't quite sure whether she was a ghost or not!
>
> She had followed me—that was the French in Zenobie!—coming over in the steerage from Tunis, and with no luggage to speak of but a vanity

box and about a pint of uncut emeralds. It was chance that brought her to Sandwich on the very evening that I was booked to give a séance. It was that Arab record that saved her the need of ringing the doorbell, and led her through the garden and to me. She says she didn't know there was anybody else in the room. I'm sure I didn't!

Love to old Tom, and to Dot and Gladys, and to you, dear lady, my apologies. The peace of Allah abide with you!

JIMMY DARIEN.

The flight of a bareheaded gentleman dressed for dinner, with a beautiful Arabian girl dressed for the Sahara, could not pass unnoted. Their romance, their marriage before a magistrate, and their plan to return at once for the more ceremonious affair befitting the favorite daughter of a sheik, were front-page stories.

A squad of newspaper men saw them off two days later.

" What will your father-in-law do?" one of the reporters asked just before the gangplank was hauled down.

Darien smiled gravely.

" Ben Oola will certainly do one of two things—which one, I haven't the faintest idea. Either he will kill an army of sheep and make the greatest feast ever known to his tribe, or he will bury Zenobie and me to our necks in the sand, smear honey on our faces, and leave us to the white ants."

The reporter insisted that Darien added:

" And after all, does it really matter much?"

But it does not seem likely that a learned scientist would ask such a question.

THE DESERT

OUR train sped through the desert land—that land of drought and death;
We thundered through a lonely world beneath a turquoise sky,
And no one walked the naked paths where no one laboreth,
And no one hailed us from that realm of dust and alkali.
I thought: "This is the saddest spot—
The very land that God forgot!"

And as I watched the endless waste that drifted to the crimson sun,
The barren leagues that ran as if to meet the melancholy moon,
I thought of teeming thoroughfares with webs of granite spun,
That flashed and shone like Babylon beneath the blaze of noon.
I said: "Why do men linger there,
With all this wonder everywhere?"

A lonely bird sailed down the hot, miraculous gray solitude;
And far—how far!—the weary ground went valiantly to meet the sea;
Great rocks arose in stern defile, like ancient captains of a brood
That long had held this land, and still would hold it through eternity.
I thought of cities of cold stone,
And these immortal rocks—alone.

The shadows folded, and the dusk fell with its glory on the land;
Deep silence brooded, as of old, when darkness hid the day's large light;
The clean stars pierced the purple clouds with beauty none may understand,
And like a silver shield the moon lay on the cool breast of the night.
The train that held us thundered on,
And then—the desert waste was gone.

But always it shall call to me when cities throb with pomp and power,
When gardens fill my heart with bliss through long, slow, healing days of peace—
The desert with its spacious miles, its wonder that is like a flower;
And well I know its voice shall call, and call, and call, and never cease.
Oh, wide, strange land where few have trod
Save those who sought—and found—their God!

Charles Hanson Towne

Borrowed Fire

HOW A KENTUCKY MOUNTAIN FEUD CAME TO NEW ENGLAND

By Charles Neville Buck

Author of "The Roof Tree," "The Mountain Woman," etc.

XXXV

PHYLLIS knew that Joe Carson's threat was no empty gesture of exasperation capping an unsuccessful argument. It was an ultimatum delivered in deadly earnestness.

Lloyd Powell was "hiding out" in that old barn only a few steps distant. The boundaries of a single farm included those two human elements of conflagration and explosion.

She had sought vainly to find Lloyd until he had chosen to reveal himself to her, and Cullom had sought as vainly as she. That was because of the old woodsman's cunning powers of concealment—and this forest craft was an art which Joe Carson shared with him, an art in which they were almost equals. His enemy was sure to find the old man's hiding place. She must carry a warning to it in due season—just as mountain women from time immemorial had carried warnings to their men who were hiding out in the shadowed gorges of the Cumberlands.

Upon her always was the eye of Joe Carson or that of Kayami, and it was not until the morning was partly spent that she succeeded in slipping out unseen.

"You must go!" she began vehemently, when she had called, and her voice had been recognized from within the barn. "I've all the anxiety I can bear. Knowing that you and Joe Carson are here, within a few yards of each other, is driving me mad!"

"Ye don't need ter feel affrighted none fer me," he sought to reassure her. "I've done hid out afore now."

"But," she pleaded, "you came in my service, and I know how I want to be served. Joe has just come, and he swears that he means to find you to-day—and kill you. If you'll only go away for a little while, he'll satisfy himself with searching and conclude that you've gone home. Then, if you insist, you can come back. You're only making it impossible for me to steady my mind by staying now. I need all my courage, and the terror of a meeting between you two men is sapping it away!"

"Kain't ye jest ease yore mind, an' confidence me ter take keer o' myself?"

"No, that's just what I can't do. A few days hence there'll be less danger. My husband has prohibited Joe from interfering, and Joe will obey the injunction, unless he acts in the haste of his present heat and passion."

"An' so ye wants ter give him coolin' time?" Lloyd Powell wagged his gray head dubiously. "I tell ye, leetle gal, hit won't do no good. Us Powells an' the Wileys hain't got much in common, but we're sim'lar in some sev'ral ways. The fire in us don't cool. We kin bide our time and hold our own counsel without alterin' none. Ye tells me yore husband is bidin' his time an' keepin' his own secrets—even from his own brother."

"Yes—to do his own punishing in his own way."

This time the gray head was not wagging, but nodding, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Yes," Lloyd said. "Us mounting folk don't skeercely suffer the cotehouse to do sich-like tasks fer us. We does 'em fer ourselves. The law hain't no satisfaction ter us, save only fer money debts an' the like. If I gets my right hand chopped off, I kain't cure hit with stickin' plaster, kin I? Us Powells don't aim ter punish our enemies thetaway—ner we don't suffer 'em

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ter punish us thetaway, nuther!" He paused, then abruptly inquired: "Did ye ever hear tell how come Little Eph Powell didn't hang?"

"No," she faltered.

The old man fumbled in his pocket for stray tobacco crumbs, and put them into his mouth.

"They'd done convicted Little Eph ter hang fer stobbin' Red Betts ter death at a Christmas jamboree. They sperited him off down below somewhars, so we couldn't handily rescue him outen the jail house."

The raconteur talked with an almost drawling leisureliness, while every nerve in the girl's body jumped with the wild haste of danger and suspense.

"In due course they fotched him back ter die," Lloyd went on deliberately. "They'd done reared the gallows and tested hit, an' they fotched along a company of milishy, too, ter make sure they wasn't pestered none. When the mornin' come fer the hangin', them soldiers stood roundabout the jail house, with bayonets fixed and rifle-guns loaded, an' our boys didn't dast attack 'em; but we'd done sont word ter Little Eph thet he shouldn't nuver hang, an' we was plumb obleeged ter keep our pledge, one way or t'other."

"And you kept it?"

Grimly the mountaineer nodded.

"We kep' hit. He died thet same mornin', but he didn't nuver hang."

"What did you do?"

"Little Eph besought 'em ter let him look outen the jail house winder, where he could see the mounting he was borned on, afore they tuck him ter the scaffold. They suffered him ter do hit." Again a pause. "One of our own boys—a kinsman of hisn, too—was a layin' up thar in the bresh two hundred yards distant. When Eph showed his face, straightway he drapped—but hit war a Powell gun, an' not a Wiley rope, that kilt him."

"Great God!" exclaimed the woman. "You mean—"

"I mean thet we didn't suffer him ter hang." The voice rose a half tone and hardened, then became matter-of-fact once more. "Hit war Little Eph hisself, though, thet thought out the plan fust, an' named hit ter us."

Yes, Phyllis mused in desperation of mind, even with a generation or two of cultivation intervening, such blood reacted, under stress, to its inherited traditions. That blood was reacting here now, regardless of all paradox of environment, and the end had not yet come.

"Do what I beg of you," she pleaded. "Make good your promise of obedience. Go away for a while!"

After a space Lloyd held out his hand.

"Ef so be ye commands hit outen yore heart, I hain't got no rather but ter obey ye. I'll go, but not fer long. I gives ye my hand on hit."

XXXVI

TRUE to his word, Joe Carson left the house that afternoon without a word. Phyllis noted the bulge of his coat under his left arm, and guessed for what he went prepared. She sat with a thousand gnawing fears upon her while the hours passed. She dared not follow him, she dared do nothing but wait. She could not feel certain that old Lloyd had been so prompt as this in accepting his exile; and if he hadn't—

She sat in the sick room, but when Dick opened his eyes and the excoriating fire blazed in them, when his lips shaped silently the reiteration of his bitter words—"Judas woman"—she rose incontinently and fled.

Cullom Bowes came while she was pacing her garden with a dismayed and hammering heart. Together they walked through the woods, while once more she unburdened herself to him.

"It has all been a ghastly nightmare," she confided. "I wonder how long I can stand it!"

"But this man, Joe Carson, must be a degenerate to suspect you as he does!" exclaimed Bowes, almost choked with indignation. "He must be a simple moron!"

Again Phyllis shook her head.

"I'm not so sure," she said. "Loyalty sees with a single eye, and in only one direction at a time. If I *were* guilty, I should deserve just such a fury of contempt as he feels."

"Contempt for you?" blazed out Cullom explosively. "I tell you, Phyllis, a man can see in others only what he can understand. Plainly enough, infamy and murder are what Joe Carson can understand."

"But Dick believes it, too."

"Dick? Oh, well!" Bowes argued with a halting lameness now. "It's different with Dick, I suppose. He's temporarily unbalanced by his condition — what you called spiritual shell shock the other day."

" Now, at this moment," cried out the woman, clutching her face hysterically between her palms, " those two may be meeting! They may have met already, and one or both of them may be dead now!"

" I wish it might be Joe Carson!" growled Bowes. " But it isn't — it isn't either one, as yet. There comes your avenging angel now, and, if I'm any judge of human faces, he's all cast down with failure!"

Phyllis straightened with a start. Following the direction of her companion's eye, she saw the figure of the Kentuckian crossing a meadow in their direction — a meadow by which one might reach the abandoned house. He walked with the dragging step and the drooping head of one who has not succeeded.

With a sudden transition that amazed Cullom, Phyllis brought back to her expression that lost serenity which she had no wish to let her enemy discover shattered.

Carson glanced up and saw them, with recognition for both; then he walked quietly toward them. So already Phyllis was sending for the lover against whom she had so short a time ago decided in Dick's favor, reflected the man. She who had repented of her choice, and had sought to escape by murder, was already paving the way to a callous rectification of her mistake. She had tried Dick, and now she was calling Bowes to solitary trysts!

He wondered what doubts would be cleared away, and what conjectures would be transmuted into knowledge, if he could overhear the talk that was passing between these two. Nevertheless, as he approached the couple, his manner betrayed no emotion of any sort, unless it was a touch of sardonic humor.

" This is Mr. Bowes, Joe," said Phyllis.

Carson bowed stiffly.

" Mr. Bowes and I have met before," he said, " when we were both officiating at my brother's wedding."

" Mr. Bowes came here when he heard of Dick's—accident," went on Phyllis. " He has a shooting box near by."

Joe Carson raised his brows in polite but tepid interest, and his voice again fell into the mildest inflection of irony.

" Does Mr. Bowes come as your friend— or Dick's?" he inquired.

" Both, I hope," replied Phyllis, flushing red.

The Bostonian's face had gone purple with wrath at the innuendo. It was by an effort that he stood quiet.

Again Carson bowed gravely.

" He is versatile in his friendships!"

Then Cullom's anger leaped.

" I've just been telling Phyllis, Mr. Carson," he said, " that I think only a degenerate mind could harbor such suspicions as yours. Possibly you heard me say it. In case you didn't, I repeat it now."

" Many thanks," responded Carson dryly. " No, I didn't hear you. Ordinarily I should feel called on to retort without words, but just now I have weightier grievances, and uncomplimentary opinions seem trivial."

" Please, Cullom!" interrupted Phyllis earnestly. " This is my affair. If I need you, I know you're here."

Bowes jerked his head in almost imperceptible acknowledgment.

" All right!" he acceded shortly, with an expression and an attitude which suggested a fight-hungry dog held on a leash. " I'm here to take orders from you; but I had to make myself plain to this gun-fighter."

Carson measured the truculent Bostonian with eyes which, for an instant, were narrowed and steely, but which flashed abruptly into an ironical amusement.

" You've done it, Bowes. You've made yourself plain," he said. " In your place, I should do the same. You and I can talk again, if you like—uninterrupted; but today belongs to other matters."

He passed on with an unhurried step. Joe had said that the day belonged to other matters, but it was really dedicated to only one thing—his search, which was by no means over.

In this flat land, for all its little patches of dense wood and its abundance of bayberry and other thick undergrowth, Lloyd Powell could not hope to remain hidden from Joe Carson for very long. He might have lived there for weeks or months secure from the prying of any native or tourist eye. With Joe, however, as with Lloyd himself, such a search was not made only with the eye, but also with the ear, the nose, and a ferret instinct preternaturally edged.

Joe was going about his work as systematically and as eagerly as a bird dog in stubble where quail have been. At the old barn he had encountered failure, but those united senses had told him that it was only because he came there too late.

The man who had hidden in the abandoned outhouse had built no fires, and had left behind him no betraying signs of residence, though he had left his quarters on such short and imperative notice of eviction; yet Carson had seen things which to a less trained scrutiny would have remained invisible. There was a crumb of dry food here and there which birds and field mice had not yet scavenged. There were marks on the old well showing that it had been drunk from at some time not long gone.

The searcher could ask no aid, because his work belonged to a secret locked in so narrow a circle of understanding, but he required no assistance. If Lloyd Powell were in that neighborhood, he would find him unaided. Not only that day, but all of several other days, when he was not in the sick room, he was on the trail.

When he gave it up at last, it was not like the bird dog who abandons a quail cover in uncertainty, but as one who knows beyond doubt that there is no game there. Lloyd Powell was gone.

Then, and then only, Joe Carson fell into the single error of judgment which marred his thoroughness. He reached the conclusion that Lloyd was on his way back to his own hills, and that until they could meet there his vengeance must wait.

He nodded his head grimly. If wait he must, wait he could. The fire of his spirit would need no whipping up to hold its banked heat. Delay would not dampen his determination.

In these days of his search Dr. Merton had announced that the crisis had passed, and that Dick Carson might be expected to recover rapidly. For a time Joe could throw himself into his other fight.

Dick knew Phyllis's infamy, Joe reasoned, yet now, though he could talk again, he obdurately refused to open his heart to his brother. He seemed to lean on Joe's presence as on a staff of reassurance, according him all the old devotion and love; but whenever the subject of Phyllis was broached, Dick fell silent, and his eye forbade the topic, while his lips shaped the unvarying formula:

"That subject is sealed between us, Joe!"

"It can only mean one thing," Joe told himself. "He knows her guilt, and he hates her for it. It's rankling in him like a malignant infection, and turning all his thoughts to wormwood; yet he can't entirely shake off her power over him. Until he can cast her out of his life, he's a poisoned man. Her influence is a leprosy!"

These thoughts rankled in the Kentuckian's mind day and night, and would not let him sleep.

"Dick's only chance," reflected the brother, "is to amputate the thought of her from his life, like a cancerous arm, before it's too late; but he can't do it, unless I can persuade him."

Nervous sweat came out on his brow.

"Even I have had brief moments of doubting her perfidy," he acknowledged, "under that amazing hypnotism of her personality, though I've seen her holding trysts with her other lover, even while she was protesting her allegiance to Dick. It's the sheer blood-sucking malignity of a woman who can't make up her mind. She can't satisfy herself with one man. I must break her hold!"

Lloyd Powell had gone to Boston, but he meant to return. To remain in the neighborhood uninterruptedly would mean the certainty of a collision with Joe Carson, and that he had promised Phyllis to avoid. The old man reasoned that though Joe would regard the first moment of meeting between them as the cue for the death of one, he would nevertheless be willing to bide his time for a little, if that moment were not forced upon him here and now.

Not being a fool, for all his recklessness as to danger, Joe might even be pleased, rather than angered, when he learned that the man whom he meant to kill had for the present slipped through his fingers. He would expect Lloyd to drift back eventually to Hemlock Mountain — which Carson might well regard as a more befitting place than Cape Cod for the exacting of feudal reprisals.

The wounded man was no longer imprisoned in the bed where he had fought his desperate combat with death, but sat in the chair in which Joe Carson and Kayami had carried him down the stairs to the sunny terrace at the front of the house. His face was still a sphinxlike mask which revealed none of the thoughts that surged and stormed in his brain; but Phyllis, when she was alone with him, read the same unsoftened hatred in his eyes. When she sought to talk to him, his cold, hard silence was unbreakable.

It was while both Joe and she were sitting watchfully near him that the wife heard a step on the drive, and looked up, with a start of foreboding, to see Lawrence Speed approaching.

The woman's heart missed its beat as the visitor came smilingly up.

"This is great!" he began. "Though I'm more delighted than surprised, for I knew you'd pull through. I told your wife so from the first!"

"Thank you," responded Dick briefly.

Suddenly he closed his eyes against the sight of this man, which seemed to bring back unendurable memories. When last he had looked into Speed's face, he was still fighting to win back his wife's love, and had not yet wholly abandoned hope. Now his love had been transformed into a repugnance which consumed him. Now he knew that the woman, for whose capricious heart he had fought chivalrously, trusting her truce pact, had done so unspeakable a thing that it staggered the mind to grasp it. Speed's coming seemed to draw together those two eons of love and hate into a close parallel that was agonizing to the wounded man.

"Didn't I tell you," demanded Speed lightly, "that it would be no time at all until we'd all be sitting on this terrace, with our troubles ended, and—"

"Yes, indeed, you were a hopeful prophet," Phyllis broke in with almost convulsive haste, fighting to forestall him before he broached his inevitable subject.

Speed's desire to talk was uncontrollable, and he went densely on.

"I told you that I'd be here, and that I'd try to bring my old *Leatherstocking* friend from the Kentucky hills. Unfortunately, however—"

"Yes, I remember, Mr. Speed!"

Phyllis's interruption came with a breathless confusion that paled her face, while she vainly sought for some curb to stop the runaway of this man's mischievous tongue. She felt Joe Carson's gaze cutting into her like a scalpel, and she heard his voice, as exactly modulated to its purpose as that of a clever actor, leading the visitor away from her control.

"A mountaineer *Leatherstocking*, Mr. Speed?" Joe inquired with grave interest. "By all means tell us something more about him. You know I'm a Kentucky mountaineer myself."

"You, my dear fellow!" Speed laughed with a rolling volume of full-chested mirth. "Why, you wear none of the earmarks. You're as civilized as your brother, or your sister-in-law."

"Mr. Speed," suggested Phyllis desperately, "are there any more lady's-slippers in the woods now?"

"No, I think they're over. Mr. Carson, you really astonish me. This man of whom I speak was more the fictional type, however. He drifted in and drifted out of our midst like a wraith from pioneer days."

Phyllis gave up. Obviously Speed had entirely forgotten his promise to withhold that topic. Obviously, too, Joe Carson had no thought of letting it drop until it had been wrung dry of interest.

"Did this traveler give you his name?" he inquired.

"No," replied Speed. "He seemed mysteriously aloof, and I forbore from questioning him. We walked together, and I named him *Leatherstocking* because his woodcraft was a revelation to me."

"The true mountaineer is an interesting type," mused Joe. "When was this man here, Mr. Speed?"

"Singularly enough, I saw him only a day or two before Mr. Carson's accident. Because of that coincidence, when the first rumors of an ambuscade went wildly flying about, I connected the two things in my mind. You may well guess my relief, sir, when I learned that your injury was, after all, accidental."

The visitor turned to the man in the invalid's chair, who nodded gravely.

"Thank you," Dick Carson said again.

His face was still a mask, and it did not change as Speed held out his hand.

"I mustn't talk you to death," the visitor said. "I only dropped in to inquire about you."

When he had gone, there was no word spoken for a time that seemed to Phyllis a purgatorial eternity. Then, still silently, Joe Carson rose and drifted away toward the woods. The woman sat motionless, with her hands in her lap, unstirring, like hands of wax.

Upon her, needing no abetting of words, were the eyes of her husband, and they blistered her. She moved her lips, but could not speak. Then she made another effort, and achieved a low-toned utterance through which sounded the burden of her torture.

"Dick!" she said. "They told me—that only your will to live could save you—and that a man could draw such will from only love—or hate!"

He gave her no response, and she forced her way forward.

"They thought it was love—that was helping you to beat death—but I knew it was hatred—hatred of me."

He still remained silent, his face expressionless, except for its intensely burning eyes.

"Don't you see, Dick dear," she broke out vehemently, "that I didn't even dare to fight to rehabilitate myself in your eyes? Don't you see that I didn't even dare to try and lead you across the middle ground between the hate that was holding you to life and the love that had drifted so far away?"

"It hadn't drifted away," he told her, breaking his stubborn silence in brittle hardness. "It had been destroyed."

"That," she went on, "was why I didn't undertake to defend myself at all. That was why I even prompted Joe when he accused me to you. The first thing, Dick, was to save your life. Then, later, I could take my chances."

"The first thing seems to have been to destroy my life by prearranged betrayal to an assassin," he reminded her, but the bitterness of his voice was glacially impersonal and dispassionate.

"I knew you were only saving me from them to punish me yourself," she said. "It's not the punishment I'm trying to escape. You can't ever make me suffer more than I've been suffering since that night, even if you kill me by slow physical torture. What I have to do, Dick, is to win back your belief in me—your respect for me. I absolutely have to do that. I don't any longer hope for love."

The ironic smile that lifted his lips was as bleak as death.

"There isn't any question of belief or disbelief," he answered quietly. "It's knowledge. My proof is the proof of demonstration. You see, I saw the man who shot me. We looked into each other's eyes, after you had given him your signal."

XXXVII

Phyllis sat in silence for a little space, stunned by the blow of her husband's assertion, and unnerved by the flinty quiet with which he listened to her protestations.

A Baltimore oriole flirted in an elm branch overhead, with its vivid hues of orange and jet. Her eyes held it as she sought to rally her scattered forces.

"If you saw him, Dick," she said, "you knew what I only suspected and dreaded. I hadn't seen him, but I had searched for him all day, because Lawrence Speed told me that he had seen a man like that, and drew a picture of him."

"I saw that picture."

"Yes, I know. Dick, I'm not fighting to win your love back, because I realize that I've lost it beyond recovery. I deserved to lose it, because of my capricious folly—because I wasn't strong enough to value you truly—because I let a whim come between us; but I had no guilty part in any conspiracy against you. I would have died to save you. What I'm fighting for now is to free myself from the hatred and contempt that are poisoning your life as well as mine. That's a fight I can't lose, Dick, without losing my own soul!"

"Is that why you protested your love that night, and then, while I held you in my arms, transported by foolish happiness, you gave the Judas signal to your man in ambush?"

"I gave no signal!"

Her husband shrugged his shoulders.

"Is there any profit in talk that can only be a reiteration of accusation and denial? I believe you were and are guilty. I believe that while I observed our truce scrupulously and with self-restraint, you broke it ruthlessly and with utter infamy. I know that in one breath you proclaimed your love for me, and in the next you were denying it and crying out that I was a brute—that you could never love me." After a brief pause, he added: "To old Powell that could have only one meaning, and you knew it well!"

"I admit the instability and fickleness," she said. "I see now that all my charges against you were lighter than air and more foolish than words can describe; but at least I thought myself sincere, and I never betrayed you."

She broke off, but Dick said nothing.

"I heard of this strange man being here from Mr. Speed," she went on. "That same day we had made a joke of what he might do if he chanced to see your telegram to Joe. Panic seized me, but I knew nothing definite, and I told myself it was just nerves. If I could keep you safe until the next morning, I thought I could find him and stop him." She was fighting the breathlessness of excitement as she pleaded her defense. "Then we went out on the lawn, and I lied about loving you; but I lied only to save your life. I heard a sound in the bushes, and there was no time to explain. It was the only way!"

"And you hated me so bitterly that you couldn't play the part out to its end! You hated me so fiercely that when I made love to you, you abandoned pretense and denounced me!"

"It was a moment of madness, Dick. I thought the danger was over. I couldn't endure what you said to me—it seemed so unspeakably arrogant; but now I'd sell my soul to hear you say it all again!"

"I should have to perjure mine to say it—again!"

"Dick," she pleaded with a pathetically tremulous voice, "the whole hideous thing has been unreal. We were married because we loved each other. We would have laughed at the idea that seas or mountain ranges could separate us. Then, I confess, a foolish obsession overtook me. It was sheer madness to think that my love was paralyzed, but I thought it. It was sheer madness to think that you were too weak to face the truth, but I thought that, too. That night I learned to know you as you are. I love you, Dick, for always, with every breath and every pulse beat! Caprice is ended for me, and doubt is dead. That night made all that's in my soul granite strong—and all that's in my soul is love for you!"

"That night"—he paused and touched his tongue to lips that had grown dry—"did the other thing—for me."

"Yes, I know, and I don't underestimate your hate, because I stood by and saw it defy death. Only—only perhaps my love can prove stronger even than *that!*"

"Nothing," he asserted inexorably, "can ever be stronger than that!"

"And yet I'm going to win your forgiveness, in spite of your certainty."

The man shook his head.

"I wanted your love," he said. "I wanted it as Dives craved water in hell. I didn't throw it away lightly. I stood at the bar of eternity when I condemned you, and I'll have to stand there again before I can forgive you!"

"And yet I wasn't guilty of any conspiracy against you."

"It's proven to my mind," he announced. "If it weren't, there's one test that I mean to make, and it will prove your actual part as an accessory as acid proves gold!"

"What is that test, Dick? I'll welcome it, if it's sure and honest."

"It's not my plan to tell you what it is. You might defeat it. When I make it, you'll know, and I'll make it as soon as I can walk. I doubt if even a knowledge of your innocence could change me now. My love for you is dead—so cold and stiffly dead that I think it's past resurrection. I'm only making my test so that my conscience shall be as clean in the future as it's been in the past. So far I've played fair."

"Yes," she said, "so far you've played fair, and more than fair. I'm no longer hopeful of your love—only of persuading you that I'm not a Judas woman!"

XXXVIII

LLOYD POWELL had come back, and no one but Phyllis Carson knew it. He had, in fact, been absent for only a few days, and now he was hidden away again in the empty barn on an outlying part of her own land.

Joe Carson had apparently made up his mind that Powell had left the country; but Phyllis knew better. She went every day with food, just as her mountain grandmothers had gone to caves and "laurel hells" to keep alive their men who were "hiding out." If ever Lloyd and Joe should meet—but she tried not to think of that.

About the house itself, for the space of a few days, brooded a deceptive air of quiet and serenity; but three persons there knew, and Kayami, for a fourth, shrewdly suspected, that this was the quiet that comes before the bursting of fresh hurricanes. Phyllis knew, with a positive nausea of cramping dread, that the battalions of doom were gathering for an outbreak. Her intuition told her that Dick, who could now take a few steps about the lawn, was not husbanding his strength in mere convalescent obedience, but in preparation for a climax, which he meant to play with the grim and inflexible power that the ending of a tragedy demands.

But to the neighborhood it seemed that a rich man's house, where a honeymoon had been interrupted by the close passing of death, had come back to blossom in the sunshine. Phyllis's own family, who had spent these anxious days at the inn, and who had come in and out with inquiries and small attentions, had never known what an inky pall of shadow hung there. To them it had been merely an alarming illness. Now they had bade a gay and congratulatory farewell, and, wrapped in dust coats, had gone motoring Bostonward.

It was then that Jim Eldredge came to the house again. Once more he presented a smiling and unembarrassed face. He found the family of three seated in wicker chairs on the terrace.

"I just came by, Mr. Carson, to see how you were mending," he said, "and to tell you how pleased all the folks up along and down along are to know you're getting well."

"I thank you, Mr. Eldredge," acknowledged Dick. "It's good to know that my neighbors were interested."

"Yes, yes—they're all interested. I was more than that—I was plain worried!"

Dick lifted his brows inquiringly. The heavy man who sat on the edge of the terrace twisted his hat in his hands.

"You see, until I talked with you in your bed, I didn't know what the facts might be; and it was up to me to find out. The gossips had their minds made up that there had been foul work somewhere. Just at first they wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. They felt that a thing like that reflected on the town."

Dick nodded. Phyllis looked away.

"Now that you've come through dirty weather and made port safe and sound, it's all right. If you'd died, I don't know but some folks might have said I ought to have done more investigating than I did."

"But you had my sworn statement, Mr. Eldredge."

"Yes, yes—that ought to have been enough, but some folks are fussy." The deputy sheriff rose and nodded. "However, that's all gone by now, thank God. You've shaped a safe course through shoal water, and that's what the shoemaker hove at his wife—that's all!"

It was after he had gone, and after Phyllis had left the terrace, that Dick looked over to where his brother sat smoking with a soberly thoughtful face.

"Joe, old buddy," he said, "can't you follow that fellow's example now and lay by your fretting? Can't you go home, as my honored law kin have done, and say that that's what the shoemaker hove at his wife?"

Under the forced levity of the words there was a tone of grimness. Joe met his brother's suggestion with a counter grimness as he turned, level-eyed, and shook his head.

"When you send me away, Dick, I suppose I can go home; but I can't lay by my fretting."

"I'm on my feet now, though."

"You were on your feet when I left you last," came the significant reply; "but they laid you low."

For a moment Dick Carson sat silent, while in his eyes gathered cloudy and stormy memories.

"I've refused to talk with you on one topic, Joe," he said. "There are some things too close to the heart to share, even with a brother whom you love as your own flesh. I want you to know that I recognize your loyalty, and value it." He paused, with masculine repugnance to put such sentiments into words. "I know," he went on, "that when you said you'd go through hell barefooted for me, you meant it; and that love of yours is the most prized thing in my life to-day, but—"

"But what, old-timer?"

Again there was a long pause. Then, reflectively, Dick began speaking again.

"You remember, back there in Breathitt County, Joe, when Ned Callahan was shot from the brush, and they took him to the little hospital at Buckhorn to die—you remember what happened."

"I remember that his clansmen stood ready to avenge him. I remember that they gathered under arms and waited for his last word."

Dick nodded reminiscently.

"And just before he died he sent that word. His message was, 'Tell the boys to quit it!' Do you remember that, Joe?"

"Yes."

"And that's what I tell you, now, Joe—just that. Quit it!"

"But you aren't dying, Dick," argued the Kentuckian. "If Ned Callahan had lived, his message wouldn't have been the same."

A grim smile crept about the lips of the convalescent.

"No!" his voice rang out of its quiet into startling vehemence. "Nor will I quit it; but what is to be done I want to do myself!"

A look of surprise came into Joe's face. His brother's tone did not fit his preconceived idea of Dick's attitude, or the weakness of a man unable to break a vampire grip. It spoke declaratively of elements of wrath held leashed but ready.

"You mean—" inquired Joe.

"I mean that I've read your thoughts, Joe. You think I'm held enthralled by a spell which even betrayal couldn't break. You think you've got to stand by to save me from my infatuation. You're wrong. I need no such help. My eyes are open. Leave things in my hands, and leave them with the full assurance that I don't mean to put away the sword of punishment until I have, in my own fashion, used it to the full!"

"A man can accept the service of an ally, when that ally is a brother, Dick."

But the other shook his head.

"I need none, Joe, to stiffen either my resolution or my hand."

"But as to Lloyd Powell?"

"Leave him to me. He's my man, not yours. The only thing that could make us quarrel, old fellow, would be your refusal to obey that command—and it would be a pity for us to quarrel!"

Joe Carson bowed his acceptance of the edict.

"I only came to serve you," he acceded; "and obedience is the first essential of service. Shall I go at once?"

"Stay as long as you can. God knows I want you—but stay as a noncombatant, and trust me to do the rest."

It was with a motive more sinister than it seemed that Dick sent his brother to Boston on the day following, ostensibly to look over some affairs at his office. Behind that reason lay the deeper purpose of preventing any interference with what he had planned—the making of a test which, to his mind, stood needful to fairness.

He had not talked with Joe about Lloyd Powell, nor had he allowed Joe to talk to him, and he did not know whether his assailant still lurked near or had gone a thousand miles away; but he felt that if Lloyd Powell had remained, it must be the man's purpose to finish the task that he had failed to execute at the first attempt. If he lingered on to play out the score, it must be with the full knowledge and consent of Dick's wife. If Phyllis, whose protestations of innocence he had not been able to accept, was still holding commerce with the enemy who had shot him once, and who was presumably planning to shoot him again, her guilt was established.

Answering these questions was, to his mind, the acid test of which he had spoken. To-day he meant to make it.

At certain times each day Phyllis went out to walk alone. As soon as she had set out that afternoon, Dick went to his room and strapped under his coat the service automatic that had been his side arm in France. He watched his chance and slipped away from the house, eluding the watchfulness of the vigilant servants.

If his wife was strolling about the place, he knew of an elevated point from which he would be likely to see her, and from which he could follow her. He meant to follow her. He had planned carefully and long for this undertaking, during the tedious hours of his convalescence.

Walking slowly, he came to a point commanding an ocean vista; but he did not look long at the sea, for its message was not one that helped him. It was all tranquil and beautiful out there to-day. The song of those appealing and lovely colors was one to soften a man's heart and stir tender thoughts; but he deliberately turned his back on any such weakness as that.

The ragged pine woods, where the shadows were gathering, gave a better setting to his somber reflections. He walked slowly to an old stone wall, fallen and trailed over with poison ivy. Beyond it ran a narrow thread of patch, and this was what he had come to watch, from concealment. He threw himself down on the brown carpet of pine needles, and waited.

He had not been there long when he heard a stir. Lifting himself on one elbow, he turned his eyes cautiously toward the sound, and saw Phyllis. She carried a basket in her hand. She walked slowly, and to the man's eye there was something furtively anxious about her.

"My God!" he breathed. "The old murderer didn't go away, after all. He stayed to finish his job, and she's harboring and feeding him here while she proclaims her innocence to me!"

He rose and started noiselessly after her, paralleling her course as he kept to the woods. When he had taken a few steps, he halted, irresolute; but it was only the momentary repugnance of an old instinct which revolted from espionage.

He stood at the foot of a white pine, and the smolder of repressed passion kindled in his eye until the brown-red lights that shine in the iris of the wolf glowed there. His breath swelled his newly healed lungs.

"Samson shorn by Delilah!" he mocked himself. "Now for the final proof, and then—"

He threw up his chin and went ahead, following her, yet never showing himself. After some five minutes of walk, she led him to an abandoned house with a dilapidated barn at its back, set in a dense tangle of trees and shrubbery.

Outside the door of the barn, Phyllis halted and set down her basket. She looked about her cautiously. The picture she made was one that might have been more properly framed in steep mountains where law and outlawry are constantly embattled. As yet she had given no sound or signal; but she turned her eyes about the weed-grown tangle of what had once been an orchard, with its lilac bushes reaching almost as high as the low eaves of the house.

At the edge of the yard, where she entered it from the woods, stood an almost ruined woodshed. This small structure made a cover behind which Carson slipped noiselessly, until he was hidden by its angle, yet almost near enough to the girl herself to stretch out his hand and touch her.

It seemed to him that they stood there a long while, as Phyllis looked and listened for any sign of danger. At last she whistled, softly but clearly; and after a few moments she whistled again.

Time seemed to stand still, stretched into waiting, and the nerves of the man were as taut as strained catgut.

XXXIX

At length, through the heavy door of the old barn, which had not been fully closed, there slipped the rawboned figure of Lloyd Powell. The old mountaineer wore no coat or waistcoat, and his cotton shirt, apparently the only garment that covered his chest and shoulders, was torn; but he carried his rifle in his hand.

"It's all right," Phyllis assured him. "There's no one here but me. You can put away your gun."

He went back then, reappeared unarmed, and moved deliberately forward into the open.

Carson could not help feeling that as the old feudist emerged from the dark building into daylight, he was less like a man accustomed to the uses of ordinary life than like some animal, soft of step, cautious of eye, inured to the chances of hunting and being hunted. He seemed to be stepping, like some great cat, from a cavern, slow yet eternally watchful. Dick's pulses leaped madly as he looked at the face that he had seen only once before, in the moonlight.

But before he had taken his third stride Lloyd halted, and across his face swept a swift wave of dismay, which instantly gave place to something sterner and more resolute. He straightened and stood stock still, his arms still hanging full length at his sides. His eyes were fixed, not on the woman whose voice had called him, and whose assurance had beguiled him into disarming, but over her shoulder and beyond her. And his whole attitude was that of a man looking nakedly at death and unflinchingly awaiting its stroke. His bearing said more eloquently than words that he had arrived at, and had accepted, the inevitable moment of execution.

Before Phyllis could move or speak, she heard a voice from just behind her—a voice of such cold and deadly quality that it cut like the lash of arctic wind. She wheeled on its first syllable.

Dick Carson stood almost at her side, and in his right hand glinted the blued steel of an automatic pistol.

"Powell," he made curt demand, "are you armed?"

The old mountaineer shook his head.

"No, I 'lowed hit wasn't nobody but her. I acted unthoughted. Go ahead an' shoot!"

Dick grimly nodded his head, and his right hand, holding the service pistol which had been swinging at his side, came halfway up. So this was the end of the story, Phyllis realized! Her husband would kill Powell there before her eyes—would shoot him down like a mad animal, and then he would face the outraged justice of a State that held no condoning sympathy for the code to which he had so unaccountably reverted. These things would come about because she had quarreled with her husband, and because out of that quarrel had grown a whole tragedy of errors.

As the thought flashed horribly across her consciousness, she stood bound in every muscle by a sort of paralysis that deadened her nerves and chained her to helpless inaction. She must break that paralysis and intervene.

Like a nightmare victim, she struggled in desperation until she succeeded in catching feebly at Carson's shoulder. He swept her aside with a movement of his left arm, as if she had been an annoying child. The movement was not a blow. It was not even so sudden as to be violent, but it was enough.

"You say go ahead and shoot." Dick's voice was not shaken, but remorselessly steadied and chilled by the tension of his feeling. "That's what you did to me, isn't it? You gave no warning. Even the rattlesnake does that—even I mean to do that!"

He paused, his left arm half outstretched, like that of a traffic officer holding back a current of vehicles. It was his only recognition of Phyllis's presence, and somehow it held her speechless and overawed, with her eyes wide and every nerve taut. After he had drawn a deep breath he went on again, steadily and implacably, his right hand, with the pistol, half raised, and his left still outstretched in that suspended gesture of admonition to her.

"But it isn't exactly warning I'm giving you, is it? Perhaps it's punishment. Perhaps I'm prolonging it to make you contemplate and digest the fullness of death. This isn't a duel, you know—it's an execution!"

"Hit's gin'rally thetaway when only one man's got a gun," replied Powell quietly. "I reckoned on hangin' when I come, an' I'd sooner be shot. I hain't none affrighted at that."

Now that the moment had come, Dick Carson felt a sudden weakness that threatened to unnerve him. He had told himself that there was no doubt of his wife's guilt, and yet there had been such an appearance of sincerity in her pleading that perhaps he had hoped for the miracle, after all. Now his senses were flooded with a realization of loss, and he tasted afresh, in bitter fullness, the transition from love to hate. His hour of vengeance had arrived—and yet he did not fire.

"Go ahead an' shoot!" prompted the victim again. "I'm awaitin'. I hain't none affrighted."

"No—but I am," broke out Carson, with sudden and passionate distress. "I find it takes a sort of nerve I haven't got to shoot an unarmed man to death, even righteously. It takes all the satisfaction out of vengeance!" After a moment he added: "Go in and get your gun, Powell. I'll wait. When you come out, my pistol will be in my pocket. I won't draw till you pass the line between those two lilac bushes. Go on!"

Powell hesitated, looked at his man, then shook his head doggedly.

"I hain't seekin' ter be beholden ter ye. Ye got the drap fair enough. Go on an' make use of hit!"

"Damn you, get your gun!" barked Carson furiously. "Don't stand there preaching self-righteousness to me. You owe me your life, and I'm impatient to collect!"

The old feudist turned and went unhurriedly toward the barn. When he turned his face away, he did not look back, although, schooled as he was in the warfare of ambush, he doubted whether he could reach the cover of those walls alive.

When he was out of sight, Phyllis began in a hushed and agonized voice:

"Dick!"

The man waved his left hand. He did not turn his eyes to her.

"Keep still!" he ordered, without looking around. "This is all your work. Watch it well. Don't talk — just watch. I've made my test, and it convicts you!"

Lloyd Powell reappeared in the barn door. Strapped on the outside of his torn shirt was his armpit holster, from which protruded the grip of his revolver; but his hands hung at arm's length, and wide of his body.

"I don't start ter draw twell I crosses that line, Dick Carson," he said. "Ye've done played fair with me—and God knows I hates ter slay ye!"

Dick jerked his head impatiently, and made no answer. His own hands were empty, too. Slowly the old man came forward, a step at a time, neither halting nor hurrying.

Phyllis stood in petrified horror, her breath itself suspended; but as Lloyd drew near the bush upon which her eyes were hypnotically riveted, the impotence that held her broke. With a low scream that sounded half stifled in her throat, she flung herself impetuously forward upon Carson, catching at his pistol hand and hanging close to him, with her breast against his own. In that moment of excitement she heard the crash of a discharged weapon behind her—heard the whine of a bullet passing near.

Carson had whirled, throwing her clinging body out of the line of fire, but also exposing his back to the man whose pistol had already sounded once. Phyllis still clung to him, with her eyes close to his, while her breath, hot and broken, played on his cheek. For a little scrap of time he stood that way, his eyes held by her eyes and his back turned on his enemy.

A dazed, uncomprehended impulse was holding Carson still in that pose, when every fighting instinct should have flung her away. Already his right hand was free again, and yet he found himself pausing to say:

"So you tried to take the shot yourself, and yet you're still playing the Judas woman!"

Lloyd Powell was standing stock still, too, with a smoking pistol in his hand, but with both arms uplifted from the elbows.

"I'm a waitin' fer ye, Carson," came the voice of the old feudist. "I'd done a'ready started ter shoot when the gal jumped, an' I couldn't stop my finger, but I flung the muzzle sideways."

"Listen, both of you! For God's sake, listen! I won't take long," she pleaded. "It's all a hideous mistake!"

Carson did not answer. With his incredulous eyes still holding hers, the fingers of his right hand slowly and inertly opened, spreading themselves wide, and his pistol dropped to the ground.

The world was reeling about him, and such a weakness enthralled him that he could not hold the weapon in his hand. He knew that his overtaxed strength had deserted him at the moment of his direst need, and that he stood on the edge of collapse. This time he wished that Lloyd might shoot true, and kill.

"This is—my test," he said weakly and hoarsely. "This is—my final demonstration. You not only betrayed me then, but you are still betraying me—still playing with treason!"

He wondered whether he could finish speaking. The light was going black before his eyes, and his knees were bending. Phyllis had been against his breast, and her soft touch had seemed to draw all the power out of him. In another moment he fell and lay insensible.

Lloyd Powell came over and said quietly:

"I reckon I've got ter man-power him back thar to the house for ye. He's just swooned from weakness."

Phyllis was moaning, wide-eyed and wretched; but suddenly she came to herself again, and nodded.

"Bring him as far as the edge of the woods," she ordered, "and I'll have Kayami come out. Give me your guns," she ordered. "Give me both your rifle and your pistol. We've seen one thing proven here to-day—so long as you're unarmed, he won't attack you, and I know he won't let Joe attack you. From now on you walk openly, but unarmed!"

"We kin cavil erbout thet later on," Lloyd demurred. "Right now we've got ter git him home."

"No!" For once her voice rose in dominant authority over this stubborn old hillman. "Give me those guns now, and I'll go ahead of you. Leave him by the stone wall, and I'll have him carried in."

Then, with despair for the outcome of the test—which she knew had been no test at all, yet which must eternally damn her in her husband's eyes—she went half running toward the house, with a rifle in one hand and a pistol in the other. After her old Lloyd plodded slowly along, carrying in his arms the unconscious body of the man who had come out to kill him.

Kayami, at her summons, came to the door, where he stood open-mouthed and amazed while Lloyd marched up on the terrace and deposited Dick Carson in a chair. Then, without a word or a backward glance, and with no hurrying of his step, the old mountaineer crossed the clipped grass again, and went between the flower borders to the woods.

Presently Dick Carson opened his eyes, and saw Phyllis bending over him, while on the terrace, at his feet, lay the confiscated weapons.

"You fainted, Dick," she said. "I've phoned for the doctor. Lloyd Powell carried you home. Those are his guns. If you or Joe shoot him now, you must shoot him down unarmed. He will have no weapon."

Then she carried the rifle and the revolver into the living room. She came out again to meet the physician, but it was Dick who accosted him first.

"I walked too far, doctor," he said stiffly, "and I fainted. A stranger picked me up and carried me in."

After a brief examination of the patient, Merton smiled.

"You're a hard child to nurse, Mr. Carson, but this time there's no great damage done."

When Dick Carson and his wife were alone again, there was a long silence. At last Phyllis said:

"So that was your test, Dick! And what did it prove?"

"It proved everything that you denied," he returned with chilling finality. "You denied conspiracy with this man, and I found you shielding and protecting him. I found you approaching his hiding place and giving him a countersign—and, God forgive me, I was too weak to strike!"

She carried her hands to her breast, and stood, as pale as a ghost. Her faint voice was one out of which the last remnant of hope had ebbed.

"Dick, Dick!" she exclaimed. "I've hurt you so that you can't see straight any more! Nothing has been proved, except that I had pity for an old man whose warped and distorted ideas of loyalty led him into horrible mischief."

She dropped limply to the edge of the terrace and sat there, gazing into his face.

"I love you, Dick dear!" she declared. "I love you, but I see now that I can't ever hope to convince you. I see now that it's hopeless—utterly hopeless!"

"Utterly," he echoed desolately.

XL

When Joe Carson came back, Dick told him nothing. It was Phyllis who led him aside. Already Joe had read disaster in her face, out of which had gone the Valkyrie fire of courage; but he waited to hear what she had to communicate.

"You offered me terms once," she said, "if I would go out of Dick's life forever, and give him the chance to forget me. Do you still offer them?"

"What has changed you?" he demanded.

She shook her head.

"Defeat," came her response in a flat monotone. "I'm beaten, Joe. I can fight no more. You were right—his only chance is to forget me."

"I offered to spare Lloyd Powell, if you would agree to that," he reminded her. "You spirited Lloyd away; but I knew I'd meet him some time, somewhere, and I could afford to wait."

"Lloyd Powell is here," she said.

"Here!" The Kentuckian's face went suddenly pale, then hard as flint. "You mean he's come back?"

"He's come back, and I've disarmed him. Dick tried to shoot him to-day, but he found he couldn't kill an unarmed man. Can you?"

He paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"No," he said. "I can't quite stick that, either."

"Then I have no other terms to ask," she whispered. "You might call it unconditional surrender. I'm just going away—that's all."

"When are you going?"

"To-morrow," she answered.

In the crowning hour of her desolation there was no one to whom Phyllis could carry her grief. In this house she was an outcast to whom it could no longer give the shelter of a home. Cullom Bowes waited at his shooting place, subject to her call, but he no longer presented himself at the Carson house. He had come there once during Dick's convalescence, bringing a face sunny with congratulation for his old friend; but he had met a cold welcome, and the only response to his good wishes was an austere silence. Cullom's generous nature had flinched and suffered under that rebuff, but it was not a time to quarrel over a personal affront. He merely took his leave and did not come to the house again. Even had he been a welcome and constant visitor there, Phyllis could not turn to him now. He had no balm for the despair that had conquered her.

Then she thought of old Lloyd Powell. Strangely enough, he who had brought her to this misery was the one soul whose loyalty was undoubted and dependable. No one in life had ever so injured her, and no one had ever been so wholly devoted. It had not even entered his thoughts to distrust her when he came out of hiding unarmed, at her invitation, and found himself looking into the muzzle of his enemy's pistol; yet that was the same sort of evidence as the testimony upon which her husband had convicted her.

In the old man's veins ran the same clannish blood as in her own, and in his heart would be tenderness for her. To-morrow she would see him, and tell him that the drama had ended; but there was to-night to be faced. Phyllis faced it, for the most part, wide-eyed, standing by her open window and gazing out into the night, but unconscious of the stars that hung, bright and constant, overhead.

Breakfast was a silent ordeal. When it had been endured, Dick rose and said:

"Joe, will you come to my room? I want to talk with you."

When the two men had gone upstairs, and when Kayami had finished his morning tasks and disappeared, Phyllis still sat, seeking to wind the spent coils of her determination for the effort of going over to the abandoned barn, and after that for the task of packing. It was a day of glory outside, crystal clear, with a tang of salt and pine drifting along the gold of the sunshine; but her heart was a cavern into which no ray of radiance penetrated.

As she sat, she was subconsciously aware of an oblong block of brilliance where the open door admitted the sunlight. Presently she vaguely perceived that it was darkened. At first she did not raise her eyes. It must be that some one stood there, but she had little heart for greetings.

Then she looked up, and with a hysterical little outcry of fright came to her feet. In the threshold stood Lloyd Powell. When she rose, he moved forward, entering the place.

"I've done come ter git my guns, leetle gal," he said, in a voice neither raised above its usual low cadence nor yet dropped a half note in precaution. "I've done spent the night reflectin', an' I kain't endure hit."

"En-endure what?" she stammered in an alarmed whisper. "For God's sake, talk low!"

"I kain't endure bein' babied an' safeguarded by a woman," he said simply. "I'm ready ter face them thet's seekin' me, and I've got ter face 'em with my gun in my hands. Give me them guns, an' let me fight my way out; but fer God Almighty's sake don't keep me goin' round a beggin' mercy by not havin' no weepon! I tells ye I kain't endure hit!"

"Go away!" she implored. "I'll talk to you outside—not here!"

"Ef ye don't talk ter me right hyar, thar hain't nuthin' left fer me ter do but ter summon Mr. Carson, an' hev speech with him," Lloyd declared gently but finally.

XLI

The breaking point of the woman's endurance had come. Her nerves had been strained until they seemed to be snapping, and then strained again, and after that yet more, but no elasticity is infinite. Now she could not even argue. She turned, with the enfeebled surrender of exhaustion, to bring and deliver the weapons which her visitor demanded. At least it would get him away —but after that!

No! She hesitated and halted. Even if they found him here, as inevitably they must within the next few minutes, he was safer if they found him unarmed. He had come to her just as she was going to him, and she would receive him.

Suddenly her bodily strength gave way. She dropped into a chair and hid her face in her hands.

Throughout the night she had shed no tear. Her eyes had burned dry and hot, like scorched sand. Now the tears came in a deluge, and heavy sobs racked and shook her. It was the agonized weeping of a misery that has plumbed the depths and sees no redemption this side of death.

Lloyd Powell came slowly, hesitantly, over to where she sat. On his seamed old face was an expression nearer to fright than it had worn when death's hand was as close to him as his hand now was to her. This was a crisis which he knew no way of meeting.

In his own heart a torrent of tenderness broke and spilled. He laid his hard fingers gently, yet timorously, on her shoulder.

"Leetle gal, leetle gal," he murmured awkwardly, "I didn't aim ter make ye weep!" He paused, watching her body as it shook under the tempest of tears. "I'm jest yore pore, ignorant old kinsman, leetle gal; but my heart's achin' fer ye!"

She looked up at him with dazed and suffering eyes, but the solacing quality of his tone steadied her and brought her back to a semblance of control. She knew how tongue-tied such a man would be in approaching the utterance of sentiment, and what fullness of meaning lay in those few random words.

After a moment she came to her feet.

"You are indeed my kinsman," she said. "You were willing to give your life for me, if need be!"

"I'm still willin'," he interrupted.

"And yet, because you misunderstood, you've wrecked my life!"

Across the grave old face passed the shadow of torture, stoically borne, but his voice shook a little as he answered:

"Ef thet's all so, I reckon I deserves eternal damnation—an' I reckon I'll git hit!"

"I didn't mean to blame you," she said quickly, laying tremulous and impulsive hands on his shoulders, and looking up into his face, with its deep-stamped misery of self-accusation. "I only want to make you understand."

"I reckon ye're licensed ter censure me," he admitted. "Ef I've done ruined yore life, God knows I only aimed ter sot ye free from bondage, like ye'd done a'ready sot me free. Thet's the way I felt erbout ye.

Thet's the kind of fire thet burns in our blood—the fire thet burns fer a man's own kith an' kin!"

She lay for a little while, trembling, against the breast of his rusty coat, which had once been black and now was green. About her she felt his lean arms, hard as leather. His knotted old hands held her half caressingly, but firmly and protectingly. There she sobbed out her despair until she could talk again. Then she drew off, still holding his hands in her own.

"Oh, that undying fire that we mountain people talk about!" she cried vehemently. "That's the cause of our misery! It's not guns and ambushes that make warfare—it's that fire misdirected, and it's in the heart that it burns!"

"I reckon, leetle gal, thet God Almighty put hit thar, an' keeps hit burnin' on."

"He put it there, Lloyd Powell," she declared tensely, "like a fire on an altar or a blaze on a hearth, to light us and warm us and keep us cheered. He never kindled that spark for destruction and conflagration and war!"

"An' yit we're jest mortals, walkin' in sin, an' I reckon we kain't none of us jedgmatically say what He aims at."

"This fire of loyalty to a clan," she went on, "was brought from the hills by Joe Carson, to my wedding. It caught me and set me on fire. It caught you, and sent you here on a terrible mission. It has wasted and charred everything. It has twisted and warped the straight, clean steel of my husband's soul into crooked bars of hate!"

"An' yit the fire of loyalty's a right good thing, I reckon."

"It's a good thing, but it isn't a thing of war and hatred and guns and ambuscades," she declared passionately. "That's not the real fire—that's a perversion of it. The real fire lives here!" She pressed a hand tight against her heart. "Here in the heart—that's the altar for it; and my heart's a broken altar!"

"What kin I do, leetle gal? Jest tell me, an' I'll undertake hit."

"You can throw away guns and warfare. I'm beaten and broken and despairing. I've lost love, I've lost happiness, I've lost everything. All I ask is peace—and that's what I can never have again!"

"Sometimes we hev ter fight ter git peace, though."

"No—that's the hideous fallacy of it all. The undying fire is in the heart, and not in gunpowder. The fires of war only torture and destroy. The great, splendid, unquenchable fire burns on for peace—and love!"

"I'm a right old man ter change my ways an' beliefs," he said soberly. "I've always sought ter keep peace with all mankind thet suffered me ter be peaceable; but I stands pledged afore you an' God Almighty ter do what ye bids me. Ef ye commands hit, I'll throw away my guns, an' suffer men ter bulldoze me."

"Then leave your weapons here, and go home!" she pleaded.

Gravely and slowly he released his hands from hers and bowed his head. His throat worked for a moment under the bristle of beard that once more covered his face, but his only reply was a whisper:

"So be hit, then!"

He turned toward the door. There was an instant of silence. Then from above them, at the stairhead, another voice sounded in austere command:

"No, don't go! It isn't over yet!"

Lloyd Powell looked slowly up. He had not started at the sound of the voice, and his face had not changed. It did not change now as he saw Dick Carson standing there above him—saw that he held a pistol in his hand, and that at his shoulder stood his brother Joe.

The two men came slowly downstairs. On the face of each was engraved the grim expression which tells that all the lesser emotions have been spent, and that death is in the company.

Joe was holding himself in the background. Dick, swinging his pistol at his side, walked to the door and blocked it, though that was a needless affront.

"Doesn't it content you," he demanded in a voice of curbed frenzy, "to plot with my wife outside my house? Do you have to bring your conspiracy inside, too?"

"I'd done come ter git my guns back," replied Lloyd evenly. "Yore wife had done tuck them away, in the hope of keepin' peace."

"Her interest in peace is tardy — too tardy!" Dick turned toward Phyllis, who had retreated to the wall and stood there, shuddering. "Get him his guns," commanded the husband. "Then, if I were you, I'd go away. The sight here won't be a pretty one!"

"He's unarmed!" gasped Phyllis wildly. "I won't arm him—for bloodshed!"

"If you don't get him his guns"—Dick spoke with rising temper—"I'll supply him myself. Perhaps your ally would rather have his own!"

Lloyd turned gravely to her.

"Git 'em, leetle gal," he said steadily. "I commands ye!"

"But you promised me that you were done—"

"I aimed ter keep my pledge, too; but git 'em."

Slowly, unsteadily, she went to the place where she had stored the confiscated weapons. She brought back the rifle and revolver. Lloyd Powell gestured with his hand toward the table.

"Lay 'em down thar. I've got somethin' ter say afore I touches 'em."

Phyllis, acting like a lifeless automaton, did as she was told. Then she reeled, and, collapsing into a chair, sat shaken, voiceless, and half swooning.

"You'd better go," admonished Dick Carson. "And you, Lloyd Powell, had better arm yourself. You're my man to kill, or I'm yours. My brother stands aside in this!"

"All right, Dick Carson!" answered the mountaineer. "But afore a man's kilt, even on the gallows, they gin'rally lets him hev his say. I aims ter hev mine now."

"We aren't here to talk. There lies the gun—use it or not, as you prefer. I warn you I'm not going to wait long!"

"Shoot whenever ye gits ready, Dick Carson," came the deliberate reply. "Hit was yore own self thet 'lowed ye wanted me ter fight back; but I'll not tech nuther the short gun ner yit the rifle-gun twell I've done spoke out. Atter thet, I'll be ready fer ye!"

In a transport of rage, Dick lifted his pistol. Phyllis screamed, but Lloyd Powell did not move. Waveringly the pistol came down again.

"I can't do it while he's empty-handed!" groaned Dick. "Go on, then, and talk, damn you!"

"I reckon me an' you kin afford ter bide our time a leetle matter of minutes longer yit. I hain't seekin' ter flee from ye, an' yore enmity don't stand in no danger of coolin' off!"

Dick Carson stood waiting with fevered impatience.

"No, it won't cool off," he said.

He wanted an end to talking, but when he held the other under his gun muzzle he found it impossible to press the trigger on one who was defenseless. Now he had no choice but to listen.

"We kin both afford ter bide our time thet long ter sottle our scores," continued old Lloyd earnestly. "You an' me hes other work ter do hyarabouts fust; an' we kain't skeercely compass hit ef one of us gits kilt and t'other goes ter the jail house."

"You and I have work together?"

The husband echoed the words in stinging disdain. Powell nodded patiently.

"Ef ye hears me out, ye'll agree thet we hes. I fared hyar ter kill ye, Dick Carson, because I seed thet telegraph ye sent yore brother Joe, an' knowed thet this gal was being held erginst her will. She'd done sot me free, an' I 'lowed hit war my bounden duty ter sot *her* free. I knows now I war sorely misguided, but I didn't find thet out betimes."

The old man paused. Phyllis could hear the strangling rasp that rose in Joe Carson's throat as he forced himself to remain a silent onlooker.

"I follered my lights, an' I hain't makin' no denials ner no *de*-fense," Powell went on. "This gal didn't know nothin' erbout what I aimed ter do. She didn't hev no more part in hit than what ye did yoreself."

Dick's face twisted convulsively.

"Of course, that's a lie!" he retorted. "But go on—get through!"

Lloyd nodded gravely.

"I don't hardly censure ye none fer thinkin' thet; but ef yore brother hed done gone ter the telegraph office down thar—"

"I did," broke in Joe vehemently. "I saw the telegrams you sent—copies of them."

"I'm right glad ye did, Joe Carson. Don't ye reckon thet ef I'd done got any message from her, ye'd hev seed thet one, too? Ye knows right well yoreself thar warn't no time fer me ter git no letter by the mail an' git up hyar when I did. Don't thet satisfy ye both thet I come on my own hook, an' thet she didn't nuver send fer me or know what I aimed ter do?"

Joe Carson would have laughed at that naïve defense, had laughter been possible to him. Instead, he answered curtly, since it was into his face that the old man was looking:

"It was after you got here that the two of you conspired."

"We didn't nuver conspire, afore ner atter. Ef I come hyar p'intedly ter kill him, what needcessity did I hev fer her ter tell me anything? Don't ye see thet I didn't aim ter drag her inter hit no manner of fashion? I was seekin' ter holp her, not ter jail her."

Dick Carson's face went suddenly pale. The convincing truthfulness in Lloyd Powell's manner was telling even on his deep-rooted incredulity; but perhaps a still mightier thing was the sudden, eager outcry of hope in his heart that the old man's story might be true. Abruptly all the crushed and trampled impulses of his denied love clamored to him to believe. Obstinately he sought to strangle them—sought so successfully that his disbelief swept back, only the bitterer and stronger for its moment of wavering.

"Why does she shield you, then?" he demanded fiercely. "It was her husband that you tried to murder!"

"She succored me outen the woman pity in her heart," declared the old man fervently. "She knowed thet albeit I war misguided, an' done her a woeful wrong, I done hit outen love thet hed erred, an' not outen no malice in my own heart."

"Are you through?" demanded the husband wrathfully.

The other shook his head.

"Mighty nigh, but not quite. She succored me outen the woman pity in a heart thet's broken. Hit's broke because ye won't believe in her, Dick Carson, ner fergive her; an' yit she kin fergive me when I've wronged her wusser than what she hes you!"

"So, having failed as her assassin, you now come as her advocate!"

"I comes" — the quiet voice for once lifted to something like fervor — "makin' one last effort, afore I dies, ter give her back the love she's done lost because of me. Ye says ye wants my life ter ease yore wrath erginst me—an' thet's hate. She says she wants yore belief ter ease her broken heart — an' thet's love. Either way, I'm ready ter sarve her!"

He paused. Then, stretching out one long arm, he went on:

"Thar she sets, Dick Carson, broke down like a blade of grass thet's done been tromped on. Thar, on my t'other hand, lays them two guns on the table. Thar's both love an' hate awaitin' fer ye. Which shell I pick up an' hand ye, Dick Carson— the wife thet's achin' fer yore arms, or what's in the gun?"

For an instant the figures all held their postures without movement or sound. Then, with a bitter burst of sardonic laughter, Dick Carson barked out:

"The gun! Get it and begin!"

Powell bowed his head.

"So be hit," he acceded.

Slowly his hand went to the table, and his fingers as gradually closed about the grip of the revolver. He lifted it. Dick Carson's weapon roared, and the bullet sped wild from its unsteady aiming to shatter the glass that covered a model of an old clipper ship on the wall.

As Dick looked forward, with the sharp stench of nitrate in his nostrils, he saw that the old mountaineer was still standing with his pistol hanging at arm's length, undischarged.

"In God's name, why don't you fire?" demanded Dick.

Powell shook his head.

"Ye kin fo'ce me ter pick up a gun an' hold hit, ef so be ye kain't shoot me empty handed," he said; "but ye kain't nuver fo'ce me ter shoot. I've done pledged myself ter lay by warfare, an' thar hain't no more warfare in my heart!"

Once more the pistol fell out of a limp hand, and Dick Carson's shoulders sagged. A new light broke in his eyes—a light of discovery. As his brain reeled, it was his brother who stepped excitedly forward and supported him with a strong hand under his elbow.

It was Joe Carson's voice, too, that broke the silence, speaking with amazed and ringing conviction.

"The man's honest, Dick! Don't you see it? He's told us the truth!" Joe cried. "He acted independently and without accessories, and he believed he did right!"

Again Dick Carson stood in the blinding white blaze of revelation, which was rapidly melting and refusing his concepts of the verities.

Lloyd Powell turned and swept the limp figure of the woman out of its chair. Slowly he crossed the room toward the unsteady figure of the husband.

"I tuck love away from *you*, too," he said simply; "an' I proffers hit back ter ye ergin."

From Dick Carson's throat broke a sudden low cry. It was the cry of a soul that has seen the gates of hell roll wide, and has caught the taste of clean air and happiness beyond.

He took his wife from the arms of her kinsman, and held her greedily in his own. As he pressed his face against hers, the other two could see him shaking with sobs, and could see, too, that her arms closed around his neck.

Joe Carson touched the old man's elbow.

"Let's leave them, Powell," he said. "They don't need us now!"

Dick Carson was on his knees by his wife's chair. She was trembling and pale, but in her vivid eyes there was the clear serenity of joy, and her hands were clasped over one of his.

"Dearest, can you forgive me?" he pleaded huskily. "It was as if I had been in hell, and had brought hell's fury out with me. Can you let me spend my life making amends?"

"It was I who should ask forgiveness," she responded softly. "I *have* asked it, and have won it, and—I'm happy!"

For a while they needed no words. Then she heard him quote softly:

"'Green days in the mountains and blue days by the sea—you and I together!'"

They rose, and each realized for the first time, that day, that outside the sun was shining.

As they came out, Joe was standing there alone, and he turned.

"Is there forgiveness enough for me, too, Phyllis?"

His voice was humble. Through her tear-stained pallor broke the old teasing flash of gayety that he had seen on her wedding day.

"Not only forgiveness, but love, my fire-worshiping brother!"

"As for me," announced Joe suddenly, "I'm just a plain, damned fool—and, in the words of our deputy sheriff friend, that's what the shoemaker hove at his wife!"

"Where's Lloyd Powell?" demanded Dick, abruptly realizing the old mountaineer's absence.

Joe smiled.

"He told me that he would 'fare on,' but I guess he must have changed his mind. There he is now, coming back, with some one else—your loquacious neighbor Speed, I believe."

They waited. As the couple came near, Speed hailed them loudly.

"I say, I've found him!" he shouted triumphantly. "I met him in the road just outside and persuaded him to come back with me!"

Lloyd Powell was indeed coming back, but he walked in such deep abstraction that he hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He had the air of a blind man being led by a dog.

"This is the gentleman from the mountains I told you about," went on Speed, as they reached the terrace. "I can't introduce him by name."

"This gentleman and I are old friends," announced Joe Carson smilingly. "We need no introduction."

"No," commented the mountaineer dryly. "We've done knowed each other a long spell. Lawyer Carson penitentiaried me one time."

Speed gazed about him in bewilderment, and his jaw dropped.

"Then I'm no discoverer, after all!" he exclaimed in childishly woeful disappointment. "But you, Mrs. Carson—"

"She got me outen prison one time," put in Powell.

"My God!" stammered Speed. "And they say there's no such thing as coincidence in life!"

"Sometimes," suggested Dick, smiling inwardly, "there's less coincidence than meets the eye!"

THE END

ONCE MORE MY ALTARS

Once more my altars, bright with incense, burn;
  Once more my heart throngs sweet with budding song;
  Once more my night's too brief, my day's too long
With your dear presence, your delayed return.

Glad, I perceive those prayers were not in vain
  Sent up at dawn and noon and evening;
  For love comes back like flower-expected spring,
With one far, dipping swallow in her train!

Harry Kemp

The Skeleton

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—THE STORY OF A LONG TRAIL OF VENGEANCE AND ITS STRANGE ENDING

By George F. Worts

Author of "The Rainbow Chaser," "Peter the Brazen," etc.

THERE was a skeleton, as we say, in Tom Coover's closet. For fifteen years it hung there, turning gradually to dust, but remaining a secret and a dreadful memory.

There had been times, during the first year or so, when he had awakened in the morning with the woman's face haunting him, her childish blue eyes staring down at him from the darkness, her weak little mouth trembling, as it always did when she was denied; but time had dimmed the lines of the pale, tragic face. With the passing of years the poignant memory of her, and of his own part in that horrid affair, had been softened.

Tom Coover was a drifter—not in the sense that we usually mean, but in the broader one that applies to so many of us. We drift along from day to day. We hope our sterling merits will be recognized by the superior person or persons who rule over us. Life batters and bangs us into pulpy nonentities. We are ships without rudders, the sorry bulk of us.

Tom Coover drifted into his perilous relationship with Emanuel Stone's wife as he had drifted into a subordinate office job at the New Harbor Cement Works. At the age of twenty-seven he was a bookkeeper—a reliable plodder, the kind of man who hopes that the boss will say " Good morning " cheerfully, or that he will say it at all, when he passes his subordinate's desk.

Lucy Stone, the woman, was a frivolous little thing with a weak chin and a small, selfish mouth. She was pretty and blond and seductive—peaches and cream and gold and Dresden blue. Lucy Stone should have been occupied with children, a thousand household responsibilities, and a brute of a husband; but she was not. She was as free as a lark and terribly lonely. When a weak, self-centered woman becomes lonely, God have pity on her husband!

She lived in a discreet boarding house. Her husband was a traveling salesman employed by one of the big New Harbor shoe factories, and he was away for weeks, sometimes for months, at a time. He was in Canada when Tom Coover met Lucy, and he didn't return until six weeks afterward. A great deal happened in those six weeks. A great many eyes and ears gathered convicting evidence.

When Emanuel Stone came back from Canada, he heard gossip. He did not know Tom Coover, but he heard all about him before he had been at home for six hours. The young man, it appeared, had taken full advantage of Lucy Stone's weakness and loneliness.

Stone was a coldly methodical man. He did not act at once, but waited until no room for doubt remained. Then he all but killed Lucy. His rage worked up until it became a whirling, irresistible force. He shot Lucy three times. Then, having failed to kill her—he hit her in the arms and shoulders—he discarded the revolver and tried to finish the job with a more primitive and satisfying implement, a poker.

A friend frantically told Tom Coover all this over the telephone. Stone had shot his wife three times, and then had beaten her into insensibility with a poker. The three other bullets in the revolver were for Tom Coover.

Tom Coover wasted very little time in getting away from New Harbor. He packed a few necessaries in a traveling bag, slipped out of town on the midnight train for New York, and was lost to the sight, if not to the memory, of New Harbor forever.

To be pursued was a new and terrifying experience to Tom, but he wasn't pursued for long. Emanuel Stone followed him to New York, but was arrested in the Grand Central Terminal and shipped back to New Harbor for trial on the charge of feloniously assaulting his wife. Some time later, from a Detroit newspaper, Coover learned that the wife beater had been let off lightly with a four-year sentence. He also learned that his own name was still mentioned in terms of the utmost contempt by the newspaper writers. It was for this reason that he changed his name to James Ballen.

Bearing that alias, he had drifted into the town of Millville, in the upper Mississippi Valley, twelve hundred miles or so from the scene of the scandal. For fifteen years he was known in Millville as James Ballen, and as a quiet, retiring, reputable citizen.

Chance, or fortune, was uniformly kind to him. Millville, at the time of his entrance upon the scene, was enjoying the ecstasies of a boom. A great flour mill had been erected there, and contributory enterprises were thriving. There was a shortage of his kind of labor. Too many questions weren't being asked, and when he applied for the position of assistant bookkeeper in the Merchants and Traders Bank, he was accepted forthwith.

He was a capable man, a respectful employee, and he had no vices. He neither drank nor gambled, and he eschewed the company of women as if they were accursed things.

His fears that some one from New Harbor might drift into town, recognize him, and expose him, were gradually dismissed. Millville had been a boisterous town when he went there; but time had refined it and made it respectable, and James Ballen was as respectable as any man in town.

II

For fifteen years James Ballen's life was ordered with uneventful calmness and modest prosperity. Only once was there an interruption—a shocking, stupendous interruption—when, one morning, the body of Lucy Stone was washed up by the river at the very edge of Millville, as if tossed there maliciously by the hand of fate, a last reminder of the almost forgotten past.

God, he devoutly believed, was still watching him, and had sent this symbolic warning. Yet he needed no warning; his soul had been cleansed by fire. He soon breathed easily again.

Five more years flowed by. Then two things happened. James Ballen was advanced to the position of head bookkeeper at the Merchants and Traders. The other incident concerned Bill Narr.

There is a Bill Narr in every town of Millville's size. This one ran a pool room on Dakota Street, dabbled in ward politics, and would supply you, if you were introduced to him properly, with whisky and gin by the bottle or case.

The two men were close friends—had been intimates since Bill Narr came up to Millville from St. Louis a matter of six or seven years before. It would seem, on the surface, that James Ballen's intimacy with Bill Narr would be frowned upon by the stern and upright business men of Millville; but this, curiously, was not the case. Ballen could be trusted. The assistant cashier, the cashier, and even the president of the Merchants and Traders obtained their cellaret supplies through him in a quiet, decent way.

What James Ballen did not appreciate in his friend was Bill Narr's really magnificent patience. He did not realize that it required every ounce of Bill Narr's self-control when the two were alone together to repress a redly murderous impulse.

In the hearts of some men time never neutralizes the poisons distilled by a grievous wrong. Bill Narr, as he now called himself, hated as deeply and unforgettingly as he had loved in his earlier years, when his name had been Emanuel Stone. His character had changed since those days, but the fundamental traits of his nature were the same. His nature was essentially that of the English pit dog, which clings to a single idea through buffets and blows and blood. You cannot dislodge such a dog from its purpose this side of death; nor can you dissuade a man with the nature of an Emanuel Stone.

Stone had courted Lucy with a carefully worked out plan in mind. He had believed her to be exactly the type of woman most suited to helping him fulfill his destiny. He was as deliberate about this as a ponderous machine. He knew Lucy well before he suggested marriage. He had weighed and considered the other young and unattached women of his acquaintance before making his choice.

He had the utmost confidence in himself

and in his plannings. He had reasoned it out that with the right kind of wife he would go far. There was no question in his mind but that he would be tremendously successful some day. Men of his kind generally are tremendously successful, unless the torrent of their vitality is dammed by some barrier and turned away through devious channels.

Emanuel Stone wanted a wife, and later a family, as the objective toward which his driving force would be expended. He knew that Lucy was extravagant before he married her. That was the kind of woman he wanted—a wife who would make it necessary for him to work harder. Many men are driven to success and bigger ambitions by the Lucys of the world, but very few of these men apply their formula of advancement so deliberately.

It was not Stone's fault that the formula, worked out to such a nicety, failed him. As mechanically minded men often do, he had neglected to include in his calculations the complete feminine equation. When the blow fell, he was stunned. His life plan was scattered in a thousand fragments.

After the first avid gust of his fury had spent itself, when the man who had ruined his life defrauded him by escaping, when his wife lay babbling in delirium in a New Harbor hospital cot, when the cold, gray walls of his cell gave him the most admirable of backgrounds for methodical thinking, another life plan matured. He decided to make it his one great task to find and punish Tom Coover.

When he was released from the penitentiary, Stone spent two years following blind trails. One day, happening to be in Millville, he chanced to see his man coming out of the ramshackle wooden building of the Merchants and Traders Bank. He had never seen Coover before, but he had secured photographs of him, and recognized him immediately.

Stone's rôle then became strictly that of the spider—watching, waiting, weaving. As the years went by, his plan took form; but he was in no haste. Certain minor events would have to develop before the time was ripe.

One day Lucy Stone came to Millville and found her husband. Out of their meeting grew the last sordid act of her pitiful tragedy.

She had trailed Emanuel as patiently as he had trailed Tom Coover—or Jim Ballen, as he now called himself. She was penniless, almost in rags, a pathetic, worn creature. Very little of her former fragile beauty remained, but the sight of her was sufficient to fan to glowing heat the embers of the man's unquenchable hatred. It very nearly lost him the opportunity toward which he was working so painstakingly.

Lucy came to the pool room and begged, without preamble, to be taken back. She had always loved her husband, she said. If he would take her back, she would work her fingers to the bone for him. She would put up with any humiliation, if only he would take her back.

It was a soul stripped naked that stood and pleaded before Bill Narr. Tears streamed from her once lovely Dresden blue eyes; but Narr only glared at her with clenched, whitened fists. He wanted to kick her bodily into the street.

She saw, finally, what was in his eyes, and shrank from him, whimpering. He controlled himself.

"Get out of here!" he said in a harsh, terrible voice. "Get out of this town before I kill you. Don't you dare to come back. Now—get!"

She staggered into the street. It was dusk — night, almost — and she crept through the darkening streets of Millville toward the frothing, muddy river that ran below the town.

Emanuel Stone, or Bill Narr, in the doorway of his pool room, watched her go. He knew well enough where she was going and what she was about to do; yet he said nothing, did nothing, to prevent her.

It was springtime, and the Mississippi was in flood. He saw his wife stumbling down Dakota Street toward that brown, churning tide. He watched her with actual relief. Her going would automatically remove a menace to his beautifully maturing plans. He envisaged the brief career of a body in the river at this time of year—plucked at by violent cross currents, battered by floating tree trunks and wreckage, perhaps torn in shreds by the giant river carps.

But the body of Lucy Stone met a kindlier fate. On the following afternoon, an item was tucked away on an inside page of the Millville *Courier-Journal:*

> The body of a poorly dressed woman was found lodged between two piles of the Purity Flour Mill dock by a laborer early this morning. The only clew to her identity was furnished by an inscrip-

tion inside her wedding ring, which read: "Emanuel to Lucy Stone."

The woman was seen by a *Courier-Journal* reporter on Main Street yesterday afternoon. She seemed nervous and agitated, and attracted some attention. It is believed that she was temporarily demented, and committed suicide. At the coroner's inquest it was established that the body had been in the water less than twelve hours.

Bill Narr did not visit the morgue, but his friend James Ballen, actuated, no doubt, by the unhappiest of motives—the need of making absolutely sure—went there twice. As a result, he was unable to perform his usual duties at the bank for several days, and for a week or two afterward he acted strangely. This malicious move of the hand of an inscrutable fate—or this stern warning sent to him by an ever watchful God—was a terrific shock to him.

III

As time went by, the revengeful spirit of Emanuel Stone, embodied in the cordial, friendly person of Bill Narr, spun a web with diabolical cunning. It was five years before the web was ready to ensnare its fated victim.

On the day after his faithful services had been rewarded with promotion to the position of head bookkeeper, James Ballen received an urgent summons from Bill Narr. The pimply-faced youth who served as porter and general handy man about Bill's pool room brought the message just as the bank was closing its doors; and Ballen, supposing that an expected consignment of liquor had been received, went down to Dakota Street with no inkling of the stunning shock that awaited him.

Bill Narr's big, pasty face was dark with concern. He shook Ballen's hand with an air of solicitousness when the bookkeeper presented himself. This surprised James a little, as they never shook hands. There was something queer in Bill Narr's manner that made him vaguely uneasy.

Bill took him to the back of the pool room and up a rickety flight of stairs into a dingy attic. Here, it was rumored, vast sums changed hands in poker orgies, which sometimes lasted from Saturday night to Monday morning.

A large round table covered with billiard cloth occupied the space under a dormer window at the rear. The front half of the room was a catch-all. Broken cues, chairs, tables, and an assortment of old trunks, suit cases, and wooden boxes were piled there. A walnut wardrobe with double doors stood against the wall opposite the stairway.

As the two men faced each other in the dusty light from the dormer window, a certain resemblance would have struck you. The hair of each was brown, and graying a little about the ears. The eyes of each were brown, and there was in the face of each the same flabbiness from indoor living.

There, however, resemblance ended and contrast began. Bill Narr's mouth and jaw bespoke a stubborn, willful temperament, strong and steadfast for good or for evil. James Ballen's mouth and jaw were those of a weak, easy-going man who drifted with the tide.

"Sit down, Jim," said Bill Narr gently.

When Ballen was seated and looking up at him anxiously, Bill proceeded with the delicate business in hand.

"First of all," he said, "there's this—you're the best friend I've got in this town. Mebbe you feel the same way about me, and mebbe you don't. No matter! The point I want to make, Jim, is that I like you better than any man I know. I want you to understand that no matter what happens, I'm still your friend through thick and thin. Now I got something mighty unpleasant to say to you, and you—yes, you'd better be prepared for it."

He reached under the table and brought into the light a bottle of rye whisky and a dusty tumbler. He blew the dust off the tumbler, placed it before Jim, and poured out a stiff drink.

Jim lifted the tumbler to his lips with a trembling hand. Bill Narr, watching him narrowly, proceeded.

"There's a river rat drifted into town week or so ago, Jim, who says your name ain't James Ballen. If cutting out his tongue would have done any good, I'd have cut it out the day he landed; but he'd been talking, and the gossip drifted to me, as gossip always does. That's why I sent for you to come over in such a hurry, Jim. This dirty skunk is saying that your right name is Tom Coover; that you got mixed up with another fellow's wife in a town back East—New Harbor, I think he said; that this fellow near killed his wife, and then you beat it. He says this same woman drifted into Millville four or five years ago, looking for you, and committed suicide by jumping into the river. He says, this pup does, that he saw you in the morgue studying her laid out there, and you looked like you was staring into the mouth of hell—white and trembling and pop-eyed, and all that. That's what this dirty rat is saying, Jim. If bundling him into the river would do a mite of good—"

Jim Ballen's face was purpling. His eyes bulged. He seemed to be strangling. He gasped, coughed, and spat, then dropped his head heavily upon his arms. The tumbler, with its half inch of remaining whisky, dropped to the floor and broke.

Bill Narr slid into a chair and put his arm gently across his friend's shoulders.

"I'd have killed the skunk if it would have done any good, Jim," he reiterated hoarsely; "but a dozen people must know it by now. Pretty soon it 'll get to old man Swaley himself. He'd bounce you quicker than a wink—the dirty old hypocrite! Then where'd you be? Jim, you had to know. It hurt me to tell you, Jim, but something's got to be done."

He shook Ballen's shoulders affectionately. The bookkeeper lifted his head with a dazed expression.

"That's all right," he mumbled brokenly. "That's all right, Bill. You *are* the best friend I have. I appreciate what you've done. You've saved me from—from disgrace. I—I'll leave the bank, of course. I'll quit before they know. Then—then I'll get out of town."

Jim Ballen was not at all a pleasant sight to look upon in this, his hour of trial. Tears were streaming out of his eyes and down his cheeks. His lips were liver-hued, and quivering.

Bill Narr was gazing at him frowningly. Suddenly he came to a decision.

"Jim," he said firmly, "if I was you, I don't think I'd do that. No, I wouldn't sneak away like that. You can't stay here, either. If you stay, you're ruined, just as you say. If you run away, you've got to start life all over again, and you're too old for that. You're almost forty-five. No, it's got to be something else."

Jim blinked tears out of his eyes and drew in his breath with a sob.

"What else—is—is there to do, Bill?" he blubbered.

Bill glanced swiftly toward the stairway, and moved his mouth closer to the other's ear.

"Jim, if you weren't such an honest man, if you didn't have such a big, strong character, I'd tell you what *I'd* do; but I—hell, I hate to have you think I'm the kind who thinks along such lines!"

He paused, as if for encouragement. Jim was staring at him pathetically. Bill hitched forward and clapped his friend softly on the back.

"Jim," he exclaimed, "by God, I'd do it! Look here. You've done your best to live down that old mistake. Now they're going to throw it up into your face. They're going to hound you out of town. That's the kind of people that live here. By God, I'd do it—I would!"

"What?" the other quavered.

Bill regarded him determinedly.

"I'd go away—sure, but when I left I'd have enough money to live in comfort—no, luxury—all the rest of my days. That's what I'd do!"

"The—the bank's money, you mean?" Jim stammered.

"You get me all right. It could be pulled off easy. Oh, I saw this was coming, Jim! I got it all doped out. Did I say I was your friend, or didn't I?"

Jim gazed at him with a sort of fascination. Then his shoulders sagged. He sighed despairingly.

"No, Bill—I know too well what that would mean. It would mean sneaking out of the country and staying out for good. It would mean going to one of those dirty little republics in Central America, where they can't extradite you, and staying there till you rot. No, Bill—I'd just die there. I'd be lonely. Then the risk of getting caught is too—"

His friend stopped him roughly.

"Look here! Why not let's do this thing together? We'll plan it together. We'll beat it together. We—we'll do the whole world together—you and me, Jim. Think of us, Jim, drinking good liquor again right in public, traveling around, seeing the whole world—just taking it easy and enjoying ourselves! Wouldn't I love to do it with you, though? But shucks!" Bill shook his head mournfully. "You don't want an old hardshell like me. I'm just a roughneck—an old bootlegger. Right now you're thinking I'm just trying to horn in on the—the money."

"You make me tired, Bill!" the other broke in angrily. "Aren't you the best friend I've got in the world? Haven't you just proved that? You bet you have!" Ballen was almost hysterical. "If you'll go along, I'll—I'll do anything! It would be fine, wouldn't it, being down there together? We'll do it together. We'll go fifty-fifty. I — I — oh, my God, I wonder if—"

He was beginning to falter, to lose his nerve; but Bill headed off this calamity by shooting out his hand and gripping Jim's in a hearty, masculine shake.

"Now you're talking!" he cried. "We'll do it! And the beauty of the scheme I doped out is that nobody will ever suspect you. They'll think you're dead!"

"*Dead!*" wailed Ballen.

"Sure—burned up in the fire!"

"What fire?"

"Ah, that's my scheme, Jim, and it's a dandy. That old building's got to burn down—got to burn down hot and fast; and it will, all right!"

Bill Narr was right about that. The building of the Merchants and Traders Bank had long been condemned as a fire trap. Built entirely of wood in the early days of Millville, it had sufficed. The new building, two blocks farther down Main Street, and not yet completed, was in keeping with Millville's modern dignity — a structure of gray granite and white marble and wrought bronze.

The present edifice would burn like kindling wood.

"But—but—"

"To-morrow's the last day of the month," Bill told the bookkeeper. "You'll be working late at night, making out the monthly statements—see? You'll send Phil Dugan and Jackson home at ten o'clock. You can do things like that now that you're head bookkeeper. Why, gosh, Jim, it couldn't have been planned better! When the coast is clear—puff!"

"But they'll know I did it," Jim whined. "They'll know I robbed the vault and then set fire to the building. You said they'd think I was dead. How could we fool them like that?"

"There's going to be a carload of evidence," Bill promised. "In the first place, if the vault doors are left open—which they will be, with you working there—the fire will burn up everything in sight, won't it? They're whopping big doors. The fire will sweep right inside. The paper money is stacked behind that grated door in the back, on shelves, isn't it?"

"Y-yes."

Bill lifted his hands picturesquely.

"Puff! Every scrap of paper, every bank note, will be burned to a cinder. You can't beat it, can you? How'll they know any bank notes were taken? So far as they know, they'll all be burned. Oh, you're worrying about your alibi, are you? Well, here's your alibi, Jim—the prettiest little alibi you ever heard tell of!"

He sprang up, unlocked the wardrobe doors, and threw them open with a gesture.

Jim stifled a shriek. On an iron hook in the wardrobe a skeleton was hanging—a skeleton complete from the parietal bones to the last joint of the hallux, a skeleton with bleached white skull and dead white ribs. Bill playfully rapped on the ribs with his knuckles.

"One of the boys at the medical school gave it to me a couple of years ago. See this little brass tag on its wrist? That's his number—No. 229." Bill bent over and fingered the brass tag. "The medical lad thought he was playing a joke on old Bill; but old Bill hung on to it. Old Bill finds a use for 'most everything that comes drifting his way. Ain't he a dandy, Jim?"

"Ugh!" commented Jim.

"That," Bill went on cheerfully, as he closed the doors and locked them, "is what they'll find in the smoking ruins. Somewhere right near it they'll find your watch, your cuff links, and other little personal and identifying belongings that won't burn —see? Ain't it a beaut of a scheme?"

Jim, still horrified, conceded that it was all of that; and Bill went on to the grim and grisly details. He really had his scheme worked out to the ultimate period.

Up Stover's Creek there was an old abandoned house boat, forgotten even by marauding boys. It hadn't been occupied in years. No one went near it any more. Bill would stock it up with bedding and food. Jim would hide there until the excitement blew over. Then Bill would join him, and the two of them would go to New Orleans, take ship to the republic of Honduras, and thumb their noses at the organized forces of the law!

IV

If any doubt, any hesitancy, lingered in Jim Ballen's mind, it was crowded out next day when a young man called at his window to ask the amount of his balance. After thanking Jim for this information, he lowered his voice to ask:

"Say, Jim, did you ever live in a town by the name of New Harbor?"

" N-no," poor Jim stuttered.

The young man winked slyly. And here, had Jim only realized it, lay good evidence of his safety.

The young man, who had been posted by Bill Narr to say just what he did say, and no more, had winked at certain obvious implications; but Jim Ballen was not a student of human nature. He did not realize that his old sin was not as scarlet as it seemed; that the elderly men of Millville were wise enough in their day to indulge in a little winking also—wise enough, probably, to let bygones be bygones, and to judge Jim Ballen upon his fifteen-year record of sobriety and industry in Millville, and not upon an unfortunate episode of the past.

" Didn't ever happen to know a family by the name of Stone, did you, Jim?" the young man persisted.

Again Jim stuttered a denial.

His acting was poor, it was true, but his denial had the ring of sincerity. He was sure of that. There was no time to lose! Supposing old man Swaley had asked him that question!

He held himself well in hand all through the day, as far as surface indications went, but he couldn't add, couldn't subtract, couldn't multiply. His mind was a maelstrom. There was a flask of brandy in his hip pocket. He needed it. Bill Narr had put it there. Bill forgot nothing, overlooked nothing. He realized that Jim would have to be nearly drunk to do what he had instructed him to do.

After dinner Jim returned to the bank a full half hour before his assistants would join him. He carried with him a big black traveling bag. It contained the dismembered skeleton, a suit of clothes, a shirt, a necktie, underwear, and six pint flasks filled with gasoline.

He concealed the bag in the paying teller's cage, then busied himself at his adding machine. It was clicking and whirring industriously when Phil Dugan and young Jackson returned from dinner.

At ten o'clock he sent the two young men home. He continued to tap the keys and turn the crank of the adding machine until a little after half past ten, when Big Mitch, the patrolman, making his rounds, peered in through one of the big front windows, saw him, and waved.

Jim waved in return, and sank down heavily in a chair. The time had come. Big Mitch would not be around this way for another forty minutes.

Forty minutes!

Faced with the crisis, with the need for the utmost expediency and efficiency, he was unable to move from his chair. He seemed paralyzed, rooted there. He had a score of distinct things to do, and he was unable to do any one of them.

There was the money to remove from the vault and pack in his traveling bag, the skeleton to assemble and clothe, the gasoline to sprinkle about, himself to dress—for the skeleton must wear, down to the last stitch, the clothes he now wore.

He started for the bag three times before he could muster enough energy to reach it. Then he acted very much as a rat does in a trap. He ran in circles—not literally, but as far as results counted.

He started for the safe, and returned to the opened bag. He started to remove the skeleton, which Bill Narr had packed so neatly. He started to remove his shirt.

He finished what remained of the brandy, and his scattered impulses came together; but five or six precious minutes had been lost.

He pulled down all the shades so that the fire, when it started, would go unnoticed for a longer time. Then he undressed. The coat he was wearing had cloth-bound metal buttons. Some one would be sure to remember that. He undressed hurriedly, but without confusion. Then he removed the skeleton, and with shaking hands pieced it together—the legs, the arms, the torso, the skull.

Protruding bones and joints caught at the trousers and coat. At the last moment he had decided to omit socks, underwear, shirt, collar, and necktie. His watch he placed upon the buttoned coat. There was some change in the trouser pockets, and his knife. The knife alone, with the engraved silver handle, would have identified the skeleton as Jim Ballen's!

He carried the emptied bag into the vault, unlatched the barred door, and stuffed it full. Pushing the vault doors more widely open, so that the flames would have the fullest sweep, he uncorked the gasoline flasks, and saturated the floor all about the skeleton. Then he stepped back and viewed the scene comprehensively. Everything was in order.

He tiptoed to the street door, unlocked it, and left it an inch or two ajar. He wanted a clear pathway of escape when the fire started.

Returning to the skeleton, he struck a match and tossed it upon the evaporating gasoline. He shivered as he did so. The attitude of the skeleton, the clothing it wore, suddenly struck him with a chill of horror. It was as if he were preparing to burn his own soul at the stake.

There came an explosive red puff, a brightening blaze. Jim Ballen raced to the door with the heavy bag, and bolted through dark and empty streets to the river bank.

Bill Narr was waiting there in his launch. His husky voice inquired:

"Got it, Jim?"

"A quarter million if it's a nickel," Jim stammered. "Let's get away from here—quick!"

Bill Narr poled the launch out into the river, and continued to pole until the darkened shore line of Millville was a quarter of a mile astern.

They waited fifteen minutes, whispering together. Jim Ballen moved about on his seat nervously.

"What if it didn't catch?" he muttered.

"Did you use all the gas?"

"Every drop of it!"

"Wait," counseled Bill Narr.

And suddenly, upon the drifting cloud bank over the town, a red glare shone. Presently a bright red tongue of flame licked upward. Then a siren shrieked—the fire alarm.

"We better go," said Bill quietly.

V

THE week that Jim Ballen spent in the abandoned house boat up Stover's Creek was a decidedly unpleasant one. He had had a foolish feeling about that skeleton in the first place, and not only did the feeling persist, but it had grown. It was as if he himself were the skeleton, as if he was no longer among the living.

The tangle of vines and weeds which had grown about his refuge, and the house boat's decaying condition, contributed to this feeling. The newspapers helped, too. They called him a hero, a martyr, and other names of that nature. He had perished nobly at his post, they said. His charred remains had been found in the smoking ruins. He had met his death valiantly in fighting the flames. There was some talk of erecting a monument to him.

Jim was greatly surprised to learn how dear he had been to the heart of Millville. He had thought that his life, during the fifteen years he had spent there, had been one of self-effacement; but it seemed otherwise. Every one, it now appeared, had known him, had respected him, and had loved him, high and low.

One of the most touching of the statements appearing in the daily press was that given out by Bill Narr, the popular proprietor of the Élite Billiard Parlors. He had loved James Ballen, it was represented, no less than if the dead bookkeeper had been his brother. It was James Ballen's friendship, indeed, that had been his strongest tie to Millville. So utterly was Narr prostrated by the death of this dear friend that he would probably have to leave Millville. He would leave, he believed, in a very few days. It was he who had first suggested the monument to Millville's fire hero.

So moving, in fact, was Bill Narr's attitude that an editor of the *Courier-Journal* was inspired to write an editorial. It was entitled "Stronger Than Death," and it dealt with the friendships of strong, good men.

> Inspiration for our daily lives springs forth from the smoldering ashes of the old building of the Merchants and Traders Bank. Two worthy citizens of Millville, loyal in life, have been parted by the flashing sword of death. The heart of the one who lives is broken. Such devotion between two men in this dissonant, materialistic age is an example from which the people of our city should glean a great lesson.

And so on and on for almost a column.

Jim Ballen devoured every word of this and the other comments upon his glorious departure to his everlasting reward. Before long he wondered if he hadn't made a great mistake. Too late the truth was reaching him. If Millville loved him so, would Millville have turned him out like a leper when the New Harbor scandal became known?

He went so far in his self-complacency as to ask himself whether, if Millville loved him so, it might not welcome him back, alive, with open, forgiving arms and hearts. He even spoke of it to Bill Narr. Bill jeered at him.

"They'd string you to a lamp-post, that's what they'd do. Sit tight! Sit tight, and keep your mind pinned on Honduras. In a few weeks more we'll be there, kicking up our heels!"

"But I'm sick of this place. It's getting on my nerves!"

Bill shook his head and clicked his tongue.

"Sometimes, Jim, you surprise me. A man of your strong character—"

Jim shot a suspicious glance at him. Frequently, of late, Bill had referred to Ballen's strong character. More than once he had used such phrases as "big, bluff fellows like you"; and now Jim detected on his friend's face an expression that was slyly contemptuous.

"My character's as strong as yours is, by God!" he blazed. "You keep your damned funny remarks to yourself!"

For only a moment Bill Narr's eyes were permitted to blaze. He was not quite ready for the grand finale. That would come in Honduras.

"Steady, Jim, steady!" he said gently. "Keep the lid on, lad! I know what a trial this is for you, but it 'll be over soon. It 'll be over next week. It's getting my nanny as well as yours. We'll haul, say, a week from to-day. Anyhow, it don't look as if I'd better stick around much longer. 'Cause why?" he asked cheerfully. "'Cause there's what the newspaper boys call 'an undercurrent of doubt' running through all this wonderful friendship chatter. When we're loafing down in old Honduras, I'll feel a sight easier, Jim. Yes, we'll clear out in a week—mebbe sooner."

"You can't make it too soon," Jim agreed earnestly. "I—I'm fed up with it, Bill. That damned skeleton is on my mind. Can't seem to get rid of it!" He laughed foolishly. "I woke up last night, and I could swear the thing was standing right beside my bunk there. Something was rattling, too, as if its teeth were chattering. It was probably a loose board in the wind or something, but—gosh, how I detest this place!"

Bill was studying him attentively.

"You mustn't let that bunch of old bones get on your nerves, old-timer. Remember, it was just a plain, everyday skeleton. A man with the—" He hesitated. "A man with all the money you've got shouldn't let a little thing like a skeleton prey on his mind!"

"If I could only have a light at night!"

"Yes, but you can't, Jim. You can't take such chances. I've got to quit coming out here in the daytime, too. My fishing luck's too bad. The bunch is beginning to ride me—fishing every day, and bringing back nary a shiner. After this, I'll wait till things quiet down. I'll slip out late at night."

VI

When Bill had gone, Jim looked over the accumulation of newspapers, but he was unable to detect, in any of the highly eulogistic passages, any reference that might be construed to contain an undercurrent of doubt.

He read the papers until dark. How he loathed the dark! There were rats in the forward end of the boat, and at night they became bold. They scampered about the decaying decks and squealed. Sometimes he could hear their little paws pattering about on the floor of his cabin.

And these were not the only sounds that harassed him. There was the water, which sucked and gurgled along the rotten planking, muttering and chuckling and whispering. There was the wind, which rattled the planks at night.

All one night he had been kept awake by an incessant ticking, measured, sometimes faint and far away, at other times near and loud, like the ticking of a watch in the hand of some one who was moving here and there. It reminded him of his destroyed watch. The watch reminded him of the skeleton. He thought of the skeleton all night long, while the ticking came near or went far away, rasping his nerves until they were all jangling.

It was a twig, he found out in the morning—a twig from one of the vines that grew rankly over the stern of the boat. The wind had caused the twig to vibrate, and it had been tapping the deck, now softly, now loudly, all night long.

He could not get the skeleton out of his mind. Every thought started off on a trail that eventually led to it. He could see it plainly, first as it had appeared on the iron hook in Bill Narr's walnut wardrobe, then as it had lain on the floor near the open bank vault, attired in his own clothes.

And that was where the trouble centered —the skeleton, *dressed in Jim's own clothes*, had come to mean something, he did not know what. It was a vague, a terrifying and threatening something; but the meaning, whatever it was, eluded him.

As the afternoon light waned and night came on, he shivered, although the cabin was warm and stuffy. In the gathering dusk, very gradually, he would make out the eye sockets of the skeleton, the curved ribs, the leg bones, the teeth. In the night he would awake, startled, and the skeleton would be teetering over him, still staring at him out of its horrible sockets, grinning its everlasting, frightful grin.

He wondered, as he had often wondered before, about the man who had inhabited that bony frame. Had he, too, been a bookkeeper? Or a farmer? A white man? A black one? What?

It would be a relief to have some facts to go by. It would be a relief to recreate a man of flesh and blood, of breath and life, out of those white bones. It would give Jim something to fix his mind on.

Would this line of thought lead a man to insanity?

The night wind was rising, whispering in the vines and rattling the loose planks, and the water was gurgling and chuckling in an ominous way.

Jim Ballen ate a light supper—sardines and crackers, washed down with creek water—and crept into his bunk. For hours he lay on his back, listening to the rats, the water, the wind. At length he dozed off, but he awoke with the very next heartbeat, as it seemed to him, and his teeth were chattering.

The cabin was black as charcoal, but he saw the skeleton plainly. It was standing beside him, its two white lines of teeth parted, its empty eye sockets seeming to emit a fiery glow.

Sweat ran in streams down Jim Ballen's face. He was afraid to blink the sweat out of his eyes—afraid, when he blinked, that the skeleton would do something.

Then reason returned to him. The skeleton faded. Where it had been was blackness—nothing.

Another week of this! He was losing his nerve, as Bill Narr had said. It wouldn't do, of course; but how much longer could he rely on his will power to drive the thing away?

His face was drying. He was calm now, and rational; but inside of another week, perhaps, his mind wouldn't be equal to the strain.

In a few minutes he was asleep again. Again, just as before, he awoke with chattering teeth, with sweat running in rivers down his face. The skeleton was in the cabin, and it was acting as it had never acted before. Always before it had stood still, or, if it had moved, had only swayed a little. *Now it was coming toward him*, with its jaw hanging in that hideous grin, its skinny hands moving nervously about, as if to balance itself. Once he distinctly heard its bony knees click as they knocked together.

It was coming toward him, crossing the cabin—no, not the cabin, but infinite space. The cabin no longer existed. Its walls had melted away. There was nothing but blackness where they had been—blackness eternal and endless. And the skeleton, with hanging jaw and flexing fingers, was coming from this infinitude of blackness toward him!

"It isn't there!" he told himself frantically; but on it came, swinging its fleshless arms.

What would happen when it reached the bunk? Already he could feel those bony fingers at his throat!

It had stopped. It was bending over him, raising its skinny fingers toward his face.

"You aren't there!" he shrieked. "Get away! Good God! Get away!"

VII

"What in hell are you yapping about?" inquired an irritable voice from somewhere outside. "Unhatch this damned lid, and let me in—or come out. I've got bad news!"

Jim scrambled out of the bunk, flew up the stairs to the hatch cover, and feverishly pushed it back. In the starlight, big and heavy and substantial, was Bill Narr.

Jim threw his arms about Bill, sobbing wildly. The newspaper writer knew what he was talking about. Jim's love for Bill Narr was stronger than death — stronger than death.

"Quit your slobbering," Bill said petulantly. "I've got to hide here, I'm telling you. Things don't look right to me. There was a fellow down to see me to-night. Don't know who he was, but he asked some funny questions. I just packed a suit case—"

"Oh, Bill," Jim interrupted, "let's go! Let's get out of this place! It's driving me mad!"

Bill's arm went across his shoulder.

"Steady, lad—steady! Let's get down below, out of sight. I walked here through the swamps—left the boat where it was. I'm all in."

"I wouldn't go into that hole again for a million!"

"You've got to, Jim. We can't get away for a week or two. Soon as they know I'm gone, they'll know they were on the right track. They'll watch the trains — everything. The net 'll be out for us."

"What are we going to do?"

"Sit tight for a while. Grow beards. Oh, I've got it doped out, Jim! I figured this might happen. You keep on trusting me. We'll be lapping 'em up in old Honduras sooner than you expect! Give our beards a chance, and we'll make up as a couple of hicks—get a second hand flivver, and tour South—"

"I can't stand it here!" cried Jim.

Bill pushed him down the stairs, and pulled the hatch cover in place as he descended after his confederate.

"You won't mind it with me here. Huh, it *is* kind of spooky, a little, ain't it?"

Jim laughed weakly.

"Thank the Lord you're here to share that bunch of bones with me!"

"Is that what you were bawling about?"

"Bill, I swear to you I saw that thing come out of space and drift across the cabin and stand over me!"

"Gosh! It sure got you, Jim!"

"Another day with that thing, and you'd have had a crazy man on your hands. Bill," he pleaded, "tell me who that fellow was alive. What was he—farmer, day laborer, bookkeeper? It—it 'll really take a big load off my mind."

There was silence for a moment in the darkness where Bill Narr sat.

"Why," he replied gravely, "didn't I tell you? He was a bookkeeper—a bookkeeper in a bank. It seems to me that medical lad said—"

"Oh, no, Bill!" The other stopped him with a wail that was almost feminine. "No! No! No!"

"I'm simply telling you what the medical fellow told me," Bill stated in an injured tone. "He told me that the bones had belonged to a bookkeeper in a bank—some bank in a little town near St. Paul. That's what gave me the whole idea, Jim."

For a moment Jim was silent. Then he burst out again, in the same wheedling tones:

"Did he tell you what this fellow looked like alive?"

"Why, from what the guy dropped, he must have looked considerable like you, Jim—tall and heavy, with wavy brown hair and eyes, and a fine set of teeth. Now look here, Jim, old scout, you just forget that skeleton! The less you think of that customer, the better off you'll be."

"How," Jim demanded hysterically, "can I keep my mind off him when you tell me he looked like me and—and was a bookkeeper in a bank? Why didn't you say he was a Chink or a nigger—anything?"

"Because I'm a truthful man," said Bill virtuously, "and you asked me."

"You make me wonder if I'm living or dead, or going mad!"

"I'm sorry, Jim."

A match flared pinkly within cupped hands, playing upon the rugged features of Bill Narr's countenance as he touched it to a long, black cigar. The match speedily expired. The ruby point in the blackness glowed.

"Jim, old-timer, take your mind off that bunch of bones and keep it fixed on Honduras, like I told you—Honduras, where a river of mint juleps runs right down the middle of the street! Think of all the fun we're going to have—a pretty little Spanish gal on each knee and a merry old drink in each hand! Are you honing to get there, Jim?"

"Its jaw was hanging down, and I heard its knees click when it came across the cabin!"

Bill snorted angrily.

"Aw, for Pete's sake, forget that thing!"

It was unfortunate that Bill had been so undiplomatic. If he had concocted some other ancestry for the skeleton, Jim might possibly have forgotten it—in time; but a queer kind of vicious circle had been completed by Bill's information. A skeleton—a bookkeeper in a bank—a skeleton—a bookkeeper in a bank—

It occurred to Jim, the next day, to ask Bill if he had been joking. Bill swore he hadn't. He wished he had; but the harm was done now, and it couldn't very well be mended.

The skeleton visited Jim that night. It visited him again on the following night. If it hadn't been for Bill Narr's substantial presence, he might have run screaming through the black swamps that surrounded them.

Bill was patient and kind, at first. Roused from deep slumber time after time, he sympathized and soothed; but as the performance was repeated, night after night, he began to lose his patience. He became irritable. Finally there was an outburst.

Jim had been suddenly wakened by the specter on its knees, fumbling at the latch of the black traveling bag which contained two hundred and thirty thousand dollars of the funds of the Merchants and Traders Bank. He screamed at the skeleton, and the scream caused Bill to sit suddenly up in bed.

" Cut out that damned yowling!" Bill snarled. " You crazy fool! You lunatic! That's what you are—a lunatic! Oh, what a joke on me! Oh, what a joke!"

" But that thing—" Jim whimpered, his eyes fairly bulging from their sockets.

" Forget that thing!"

" How can I? You told me—"

Bill Narr made as if to leap across the cabin.

" If you let another pipe out of you about that thing," he declared savagely, " I'm going to kill you! So help me, I am! Get back into your bunk and go to sleep!" To himself he muttered: " Oh, God, what a finish!"

" Do you mind if I light the lantern?"

" Light it. Set fire to the ship if you want to, but get to bed! Oh, Lord, he's slippin' fast. He's crazy—crazy!"

VIII

Now Bill Narr was, as we know, a strong man—a determined man. If he possessed a fault, it was that he clung too tenaciously to an idea once it inhabited him, or he inhabited it. The periodic ravings of his companion were beginning to eat their way through the thick skin which surrounded and protected that trait.

It was happening too often. Like a door that is chopped at long enough, or a flagstone upon which water drips incessantly, he was wearing down. Deprived of sleep night after night, he was jumpy, nervous, irritable. More than this, he was growing uneasy. He found himself glaring suddenly behind him, as if there actually was a presence, some imminent, unseen peril, in that dark, moldy cabin.

Jim was responsible for this feeling, of course—he saw the thing so clearly.

The time was ripening, Bill realized, for staging the grand finale. He had wished to wait until they reached Honduras, but he was tired of waiting. Fifteen years he had waited and schemed. It was long enough.

His decision to hasten matters, to bring them to a conclusion, was precipitated by two things. One of these was Jim's behavior. His mind was slipping rapidly. He was seeing the skeleton in broad daylight, screaming at it, beating it off with his hands, until he sank to the floor in a state of utter exhaustion.

And one time Bill Narr had been caught off his guard. He himself had faintly discerned the outlines of something — something that might have been a skeleton. Was he slipping, too?

But his dominant reason for deciding to bring the matter to its close was an idea. Strange that that idea had not occurred to him before! He decided to wait until the afternoon darkened. Dusk was the fitting time.

During that day there was something new in Bill Narr's manner—a great change, although Jim did not apparently observe it. It was as if life had suddenly brightened for Bill. Yet he was sullen, almost curt, to Jim.

At supper he ate little, drank nothing, and ignored Jim's faltering attempts at making talk. Jim dimly sensed that something was amiss.

" Why aren't you drinking anything tonight, Bill?"

" That's my business."

The custom, once started, had been continued, of lighting the lantern before darkness came. Jim had done this, and had cleared off the little table in the cabin, when Bill curtly ordered him to fetch the traveling bag.

" Put it beside my chair," he told the bookkeeper.

Jim did so.

" Sit down in that one."

Jim, still smiling foolishly, obeyed. He sat down and folded his hands in his lap. His eyes were vacuous; his head shook like an aspen leaf. It was all too evident that he was on the verge of a complete mental collapse.

Bill Narr glared at him.

" What's my name?" he snapped.

" Your name?" Jim gasped. " Why, it's Bill Narr, of course!"

" Uhuh! Of course—of course! How much money did we figure there is in this bag?"

" Two hundred and thirty thousand dollars," was the prompt reply. " Why?"

" Never mind why."

Bill Narr leaned forward with a cold, hateful light in his eyes. He started to speak, changed his mind, and thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. Slowly and hopelessly he shook his head.

"Why aren't you a man?" he muttered. "Why can't I get even a little pleasure out of killing you? In about two minutes you're going to go stark, raving mad—when I tell you what I'm going to do to you, Tom Coover!"

"What?" Jim Ballen exclaimed, bewildered. "What are you saying, Bill?"

Slowly, as if he was very tired, Bill Narr removed from his coat pocket a badly rusted revolver. Slowly he spun the cylinder, and slowly shook his head.

"There's three bullets in this for you, my friend, but what—what's the fun of killing a rabbit? Fifteen years ago they were labeled with your name. You were Tom Coover then; but you're not going to get these bullets, Tom Coover. You're going—"

The man who had been Tom Coover was staring at him as if fascinated. Certainly there was intelligence in his eyes now.

Bill Narr sprang up with such violence that he overturned the chair.

"You know me now?" he barked. "Never saw me before we met in Millville, did you? Sure! Look me over good! I'm Emanuel Stone! I'm the fellow whose wife you stole—you sneaking, rotten skunk!"

The look of intelligence in Tom Coover's eyes became less acute. It expired. A silly grin flickered at his loose lips. A thin laugh emerged.

"That's a good one, Bill!"

Bill Narr—Emanuel Stone—sank upon the table.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned. "Oh, my God! After all the trouble I took to work this out, right down to the very minute, with you sitting there across from me! And this is all the fun I get! An idiot on my hands, a lunatic—a yowling, slobbering lunatic!"

"Bill," the other said apologetically, "I'm as thirsty as hell. Let's have a drink."

Emanuel Stone sagged and sighed.

"Some revenge! For years I kept my hands off that flabby, yellow throat every day and every night—waiting, just waiting to do it right; and now you won't even know what's happening to you. By God, you will, too! Stand up!"

Tom Coover blinked at him childishly.

"What are you talking to yourself about, Bill? Let's mix up something to drink."

"Stand up!"

Tom Coover stood up, smiling vaguely and wonderingly.

"Look me in the eye!"

The wandering, vacuous eyes fluttered to Narr's, and remained there.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Why, of course I do, Bill," the reply came petulantly. "You asked me that same question before."

"I am not Bill Narr. Do you get that, you lunatic? I am not Bill Narr. Say it after me, damn your hide! 'You are not Bill Narr.'"

"You—are—not—Bill—Narr."

"Then who am I?"

"Well, who are you?"

"I am Emanuel Stone. Does it mean anything to you? Think—think hard!"

"I—can't—seem—to—remember."

"Try harder. I am Emanuel Stone. You are Tom Coover. You used to live in a town called New Harbor. So did I. We both lived in New Harbor. Remember?"

"New Harbor?"

"Yes—New Harbor. Keep on remembering that I am Emanuel Stone. I used to travel out of New Harbor for the New Harbor Shoe Company. My wife's name was Lucy Stone. Do you remember her? Who was Lucy Stone?"

"Lucy Stone? There was a woman—yes, yes!"

"Lucy Stone was my wife. I'm going to kill you in less than ten minutes for what you did to my wife! I'm going to kill you as I killed her, damn you! I'm going to rope your hands together and make you walk of your own accord into this creek. It's deep—deep enough. I'm not going to push you. I'm not going to touch you. You're going to walk off the deck of your own will and accord. You're going—"

He stopped. Tom Coover's eyes were no longer meeting his, but staring past him with a look of agony and horror into a corner—the skeleton's favorite corner. His mouth was hanging loosely, and saliva was drooling from it. His forehead and cheeks began to shine with sweat.

"Bill!" he moaned. "Bill—that thing! It never came before when we were talking. Don't let it touch me, Bill!" His voice rose to a scream. "Keep it away from me, Bill! Don't let it—"

The hair was rising on the back of Bill Narr's neck. There *was* a glimmering, ghostly something moving in the corner! It seemed to creep forward, to retire, like a crab venturing stealthily from its hole in the sand. A faint rattling accompanied it.

Something cold and clammy was clutching at him, and his heart was jumping frantically. He was white now, nearly as white as Tom Coover.

IX

THERE was a further rattling, then a scraping noise.

Three seconds too late Bill Narr interpreted these sounds. He turned and glanced wildly upward.

The hatch cover over the stairs leading into the cabin had been slid back. A head and shoulders were silhouetted against the faint light of the stars. An arm, bare and hairy, extended downward, and in the hand was a blue steel revolver, an army automatic, pointing squarely at Emanuel Stone's stomach.

Slowly the owner of the hairy arm descended the stairs. He was a pleasant-looking young fellow, with alert blue eyes and a complexion scorched by sun and wind. He wore khaki trousers, a sleeveless undershirt, and no shoes.

With the revolver bearing upon Emanuel Stone's stomach, he grinned.

"Which of you is James Ballen, the bookkeeper?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Which, I said—which?"

The color had returned in a fiery red wave to Emanuel Stone's face.

"That—that lunatic—there!" he panted hoarsely.

"Then," the young man went on briskly, "I infer that you must be William Narr. Right?"

"What of it?"

"Simply this, Mr. Narr—you gentlemen are my prisoners. Is this fellow really crazy?"

"He's crazy, all right enough," Emanuel Stone answered wrathfully; "and you're a whole lot crazier if you think you're going to take me!"

He stepped prospectively toward the stairs. The automatic shot forward six inches.

The young man was saying amiably:

"Well, if you're the one who engineered it all, I certainly wouldn't have the nerve to say that you are crazy; but you made a lot of mistakes. You really did, Mr. Narr. I've been following the case pretty thoroughly. In fact, I'm the engineer on the other side. You don't look very happy, Mr. Narr—and this poor fellow here, he's crazy, eh? Tough—mighty tough! Excuse me if I seem to be laughing. That poor old half burned skeleton that Millville was going to bury with such honors! But it wasn't the skeleton that put us wise. Oh, my, no! It was the charred remains of something else—the charred remains of the little bit of change you left behind in the vault. There are government experts, Mr. Narr, who can count ashes faster than you can count greenbacks. It's a fact! I'll take it back about the skeleton. That *was* where you went wrong, after all. You see, it was the skeleton of a woman. Well, too bad you don't see the joke. I've got a rowboat out here, and I'm going to manacle you two—"

"A lady!" Emanuel Stone exploded.

"Why, yes, sure—a lady. Seems to me I've got her name some place. That was another little error you boys made—you forgot to take the little brass identification tag off her wrist; so it was easy to trace her through the medical school. Uhuh! Here it is."

He quoted rapidly from the page of a little red notebook, managing somehow to keep one eye on Emanuel Stone.

"'Body unclaimed at morgue. Name—Lucy Stone.' Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

For Emanuel Stone was acting very queerly indeed. He was beating his face as if a swarm of hornets had suddenly been loosed upon him. His eyes bulged out as if actual pressure had been brought to bear behind them.

Then he sprang backward, with a hoarse, inarticulate cry, carrying the flimsy little table crashing against the cabin wall. He sat down heavily, and brushed a hand wearily over his forehead.

The young man stared as if hypnotized. He knew nothing of the strange trait which underlay Emanuel Stone's willful character. He did not guess that Stone had broken under the pressure of days and nights in this lonely swamp with a madman; that Emanuel Stone had reached out for an utterly absurd idea, had fastened upon it, and would cling to it to the end. All that he knew was that the clever mind that had engineered the robbery of the Merchants and Traders Bank had suddenly been bereft of its reason.

Emanuel Stone blinked dazedly, and his mouth gaped as Tom Coover's had gaped a few minutes before. Tom Coover was staring vehemently into the dreaded corner, and it was in that direction that Emanuel Stone, with bulging, terrible eyes, was now staring.

The young man glanced curiously at the corner. In its inky shadows he made out the form of some light garment—a suit of underwear, perhaps—hanging on a nail.

He shook Emanuel Stone's shoulder and prodded Tom Coover with his toe.

" Come out of it, fellows," he urged gently. " We're going home. We're all going back to Millville!"

THE END

WINTER MAGIC

Winter, that hath few friends, yet numbers those
Erect of spirit and delicate of eye.
All may applaud sweet Summer, with her rose,
And Autumn, with his banners in the sky;
But when from the earth's cheek the color goes,
Her old adorers from her presence fly.

So cold her bosom seems, such icy glare
Is in her eyes, while on the frozen mere
The shrill ice creaks in the congealing air,
Where is the lover that shall call her dear,
Or the devotion that shall find her fair—
The white-robed widow of the vanished year?

Yet hath she loveliness more rare than flowers;
Dreams hath she, too, and tender reveries,
Tranced 'mid the rainbows of her gleaming bowers,
Or the hushed temples of her pillared trees.
Summer hath scarce such soft and silent hours,
And he who finds her thus forgets to freeze.

Yea, he who takes her to his bosom knows,
Lost in the magic crystal of her eyes,
Upon her vestal cheek a fairer rose,
What rapture and what passionate surprise
Await his kiss beneath her mask of snows,
And what strange fire beneath her pallor lies.

Beauty is hers all unconfused of sense,
Lustral, austere, and of the spirit fine;
No cloudy fumes of myrrh and frankincense
Drug in her arms the ecstasy divine;
But stellar awe that kneels in high suspense,
And hallowed glories of the inner shrine.

And for the idle summer in our blood
Pleasures hath she of rapid-tingling joy,
With ruddy laughter 'neath her frozen hood,
Purging our mortal metal of alloy;
Stern benefactress of beatitude,
Turning our leaden age to girl and boy!

Richard Le Gallienne